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**Genuine Tuvan: Producing Authenticity in the Republic of  
Tuva**

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**Genuine Tuvan: Producing Authenticity in the Republic of  
Tuva**

**by**

**Eliot Andrew Stone, B.A.**

**Thesis**

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*To Paul Halamicek,*  
*For the spirit of*  
*Adventure*



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## **Abstract**

# **Genuine Tuvan: Producing Authenticity in the Republic of Tuva**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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This thesis provides analysis of the networks of power and authority, which interconnect commonly referenced sources of knowledge about Tuvan throat singing. These sources—books, websites, performances, a documentary film, CD liner notes, and the individuals involved in their production—comprise a substantial portion of contemporary public discourse that represents Tuva and its musical practices to the English speaking world and serve to produce “experts” and “expert knowledge” of throat singing. This work also shows how public discourse of Tuva forms an “authentic”, homogenous, romanticized and spiritualized pan-Asian identity centered on the practices of throat singing, shamanism, and nomadism. The conclusion offers an explanation as to why the public discourse focused on Tuvan throat singing locates the “authentic” in rural Tuva, why throat singing is so often aligned with the spiritual, the healing, and the eternal, and why such conceptions serve to benefit the careers of those involved with the production of such an image. This chapter also explores whether or not representing

Tuva with an idealized and romanticized image places Tuvans and related ethnic groups at a disadvantage socially, politically, and economically.

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## **Prelude**

**APRIL 5TH, 2007- AUSTIN, TEXAS, UNITED STATES**

Ayan Shirzhik adjusted his posture and lifted his chin. His lips parted slightly as he elevated his soft palate. His vocal chords began to vibrate, his larynx descended and just above the ventricular folds, minutely controlled musculature constricted and engaged. The singularity of his voice fractured and sprayed out over the crowd, tinny in timbre, displaying obvious delineations between the highest audible frequencies. His epiglottis moved into positions commonly used for vowel production, and, above the fundamental, a soft, whistling melody became audible.

Jaws dropped in the audience as Ayan produced notes representing three vocal registers simultaneously. A woman seated next to me whispered, “He is singing three pitches at once! This is incredible. It sounds flute-like,” her own vocal harmonics fleetingly evaporated above her declaration. Her eyes glittered with tears. A metallic treble clef perched on her ring finger refracted stage lights into their constituent colors.

Horripilations flooded over me. I felt my face transform: my eyes narrowed, my cheek bones lengthened and migrated toward my temples, and in my throat a familiar tension coiled itself into a knot, stifling my breath. My diaphragm descended preparing for sustained exhalation. The rhythmic pulse of *Eki Attar* began to echo in my mind. Turkic nouns hurriedly affixing suffixes, completing the grammar and finding the proper

vowel harmony to accentuate the contours of the song's melody. I felt my lips part, my soft palate raise, and my mind imagine and trace the chambers of my sinus.

A series of fanciful imaginings raced across my mind's eye. The polyphonic melody lines emanating from a now distant performance hall stitched the contours of a timeless landscape: vast plains circumscribed by distant glacial peaks expanded outward before me. Mountain streams rippled past as I made my way through waving grasses toward the edge of a boreal forest. A slight breeze caught the boughs of the juniper and smeared a deep emerald across the sky as the image muddled and faded. The sun sank behind the blurred edges of rapidly dissolving mountain peaks.

Ayan brought his *a cappella* solo to a close with an unvoiced, aspirated plosive. My mind slowed its journey as I sat back in my chair and focused on the silence enveloping the performance hall before applause erupted stage-ward. Slowly, the raised texture on my forearm receded, my cheek bones returned to their indiscernible position, and the knot in my throat, along with its attendant desire, had vanished. The woman seated next to me fingered her bejeweled necklace and plaintively declared, "This is *real* culture!"

After the venue doors closed and proceeds from record sales were counted, I congratulated Ayan Shirzhik on the fantastic performance in excited, broken Russian. Ayan turned away sharply, slightly grimacing and spit at Sean in Tuvan. Sean avoided direct translation and summarized, "He is really upset about his performance tonight. The acoustics did not provide him with enough feedback; he could not hear himself."



“You were great!” I retorted. “Your music was hallucinogenic. I saw images of Tuvan landscapes in my mind. Many audience members told me they had similar experiences. Don’t be so hard on yourself. It was magic!” Ayan walked toward the car, hurling another phrase of harmonious Turkic grammar over his shoulder. Sean shrugged, “He said ‘Oh, so now you all know what Tuva looks like, huh?’ Ayan is not mad at you specifically; he is a perfectionist. But hey, he is not a professional musician for nothing.”



**Illustration One:** Nachyn Choodu, Ayan Shirzhik, Ayan ool Sam and Sean Quirk of the *Alash* ensemble on The University of Texas campus

**JUNE 28TH, 2011- CHEDDI XUL, REPUBLIC OF TUVA, RUSSIAN FEDERATION**

Doublewide tire tracks cut through wind driven, crashing tides of knee high grasses differentiating and re-congealing atop the alpine pasture. Ayan-ool Sam of the

*Alash* Ensemble affixed the decorative anterior flap of his silken robe to a noose shaped braid stitched to his lapel. With the twist of forefinger and thumb, he concealed blue jeans and a t-shirt bearing the insignia of the 2011 Huntington College Folk Festival. The wide brim of his denim hat was folded upward, comically elongating his forehead. A large-mouth bass patch sewn into the crown suggested a latent, riparian daydream.

Ayan-ool stood next to other members of the Tuvan National Orchestra and the Tuvan National Theatre, who braved the three-hour bus ride from the Tuvan capital to *Cheddi Xul* for a weekend of convivial sports competition and outdoor revelry. Several musicians and actors hurriedly adjusted their national costumes in anticipation of the opening ceremony. Others less formally engaged lent their efforts to the construction of a monument comprising three rigid, branchless juniper saplings. A table supporting cellophane-wrapped candy, sugar cookies and bowls of milk stood beside a small fire ring, in which birch logs blazed, sending glowing embers skyward.

A middle aged Tuvan woman clad in an emerald, silken robe began the ceremony by flinging milk upward and outward with a small, slotted, wooden spoon. The milk droplets were carried by the wind during their downward descent and disappeared into the rustling grass. She began in academic Russian,

“Modern psychology shows us that the shamanic practice of making offerings helps people form a sense of responsibility to their natural environment. When Tuvans who lived as nomads hundreds of years ago in this very location made offerings they were actually developing parts of their brains, which have been scientifically linked to the production of chemicals that govern relational bonds between humans. Perhaps, by adopting these practices, we can teach our society to respect the beautiful land around us and feel the need to protect it from threats of exploitation and pollution”.

As the exposition of her recent Ph.D. work in applied psychology continued, an enormous projector screen was erected along the banks of the adjacent freshwater lake. Volleyball nets spanned twin, tethered aluminum balusters that shimmered in the afternoon light. A gas-powered generator kicked on and loudspeakers blared a thumping, techno bass line that would repeat intermittently for the next three days. The projector flashed to life, illuminating the screen with images of familiar faces from the National Orchestra and Theatre performing their arts on international stages. With cries of excitement the sports retreat solidified and began, encompassing and insulating us all.



**Illustration Two:** A volleyball game begins at the retreat grounds in Cheddi Xul, Republic of Tuva

## **AUGUST 2ND, 2011- KYZYL, REPUBLIC OF TUVA, RUSSIAN FEDERATION**

Aldar Tamdyn was waiting in his Toyota station wagon in front of 43 Lapsanchapa Street. The Soviet era concrete block apartment building that soared nine stories above was replicated and scattered throughout a grid network of walking paths and streets comprising the neighborhood locally dubbed “New York”. I opened the passenger door and was greeted by a beautifully cinematic moment: Aldar’s smiling face- his eyes occluded by sleekly tapered sunglass lenses- set to the overwhelming charisma of Fela Kuti’s trumpet section.

With a crunch of loose gravel, Aldar sped away from the neighborhood and turned left onto the *Shogonar* highway. We were traveling toward *Aldyn Bulak*[1], a recently constructed “ethno-tourist” complex situated in the rolling foothills west of Kyzyl. *Aldyn Bulak* features a collection of yurts built on permanent concrete foundations retrofitted with television satellites, air conditioners and tawdry, faux gold light fixtures. The yurts populate a small valley surrounded by craggy outcrops from which one may leisurely take in views of the broad, passing river set in relief against the desolate expanse of the Siberian steppe.

After a brief stroll through the complex, Aldar noticed the perplexity of my comportment and explained, “When people come to Tuva to become a shaman, a throat singer, or even a scientist, they need a place to stay. This is good business, you know? Our minister of culture went to Mongolia recently, and they attract many visitors with

their ethno-tourist centers”. My mind began to spin. What did he mean by business?

Aldar continued, “The *Khoomei Ovaa* is on the other side of that hill. Let’s get to work”.

I stood at the base of the *Khoomei Ovaa*- a monument dedicated to Tuvan throat singing- whose intricately carved, wooden spires each displayed motifs representative of a particular throat singing style. The Tuvan Ministry of Culture funded the project and hired Aldar as the chief architect and contractor. Aldar planned to complete the construction that day, a task for which he had enlisted the help of a small but dedicated crew. Reeling, I listlessly tossed a stone whose weight grossly exceeded its size onto a large pile of delicately stacked rocks at the base of the *ovaa*.

Members of the crew included Belik ool, a Tuvan epic poet and musician, Enrique Ugalde, a throat singing aficionado and taxi driver from Portland, and Justin Barton, a Deleuze inspired philosopher from London, who for six days prior hiked alone in the alpine forest outside Kyzyl attempting to “become animal”. As we cleaned debris away from the construction site, and arranged decorative rocks at the base of the *ovaa*, Aldar informed us that he invited a man who was not quite shaman and not quite Buddhist monk to come perform an opening ritual to bless the *ovaa* and invite the spirits of *khoomei* to reside there and imbue the site with spiritual power.

The shaman monk arrived and began his ceremony, asking all present to kneel at the base of the *ovaa*. Bells jingling, he walked circles around the *ovaa*, occasionally stopping to bow to the monument and mutter incantations. The shaman eventually stood firmly upright and blew a brass, bone shaped whistle toward each of the cardinal directions. He then told us that the ceremony was successful and the spirits of *khoomei*

would soon arrive to bless and protect the monument. Aldar explained to Enrique, Justin and I that he had not arranged the ceremony for us, but for the *ovaa* and the local spirits.

Enrique looked confused and asked, “What? Why would you do it for us? Of course it is for the spirits. You built this thing...”

A distant roar grew in intensity and diverted my attention. I searched the horizons for the source of the sound. An amorphous blur of black was offset against the low ceiling of the overcast sky and rapidly approached the site of the *ovaa*. The flashing lights and twirling blades of a Russian military helicopter quickly became discernible in the fading, evening light. Flying low overhead, the helicopter descended toward a negotiable landing site at the top of a small hill opposite the *ovaa*.

Prayer flags flapped in the wind of the helicopter’s downward thrust, as the skids settled and cabin doors opened. A famous Muscovite film actor and his family exited the aircraft and gazed toward the horizons, open mouthed with wonder. A Tuvan official wearing a red tie and smart suit accompanied by a pilot in fatigues lead them down the hillside toward the tourist complex. Hordes of Tuvans dressed as Mongols, Scythians, Huns, and other mytho-historical figures of the East charged from their hiding places amongst the rocks. Beating drums and wielding spears, the warriors festively greeted the family at the doors of the largest yurt that serves as bar and restaurant.

On the opposite side of the hills that enclose *Aldyn Bulak*, a flatbed cargo truck parked in a position concealed from view of the yurts. In the bed of the truck sat a visibly perturbed Bactrian camel securely strapped in place with yellow cargo webbing. The driver exited the vehicle and began unloading the vocally protestant camel with the



truck's mechanized crane. The camel was then dressed in a colorful faux silk ensemble and a fully costumed rider mounted the camel and stormed the yurt camp from the top of the hill.

I followed the camel with my eyes until he reached the apparently terrified children and thrilled father. My gaze left the yurts and followed the ridgeline back up the road to the helicopter, over the hill's crest and back to the *Shogonar* highway. The taillights of speeding cars bobbed and weaved in the fast approaching dark on the uneven asphalt leading back to Kyzyl.



**Illustration Three:** Belic ool watches as a helicopter lands adjacent to the *Khoomei Ovaa* at the *Aldyn Bylak* ethno-tourist center west of Kyzyl

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the social, political and economic conditions navigated by musicians from the Republic of Tuva in the post-Soviet historical context. Based on my experiences as a volunteer promoter of the Tuvan ensemble *Alash* in the United States since 2007, a throat singing practitioner, performer and instructor, and a developing scholar who conducted fieldwork in the Republic of Tuva in the summer of 2011, this work attempts to present the interests of Tuvan performers as they meet with forces of local and global demand. This study focuses particularly on the strategic use of the concept of authenticity to address simultaneously the social, psychological, and economic needs of Tuvans facing the post Soviet social and economic crisis and how the construction of an ‘authentic’ Tuvan identity generates the demand of international audiences.

This thesis centers around three issues. The first concerns how the construction of a static, pre-determined, pre-linguistic Tuvan subjectivity serves to support and ground a distinctly Tuvan cultural identity. While claims to a deterministic, ‘authentic’ cultural continuity of rural Tuvan practices provides stability on the individual level for many Tuvans facing the post-Soviet social and economic crisis, I maintain that such claims undermine the creative potentials of many Tuvan artists, exacerbate ethnic tensions between Slavic Russians and Tuvans, and reduce contemporary Tuvan identity to a romantic stereotype.

Closely related to the first issue presented, I explore the conflict and interplay between everyday life as culture and public cultural productions. Throat singing performances and the ‘experts’ involved in their production have come to represent an



‘authentic’ source of Tuvan culture in Tuva and abroad; however, not all Tuvans identify with the “neo-traditionalist” ethos that throat singing ensembles help to produce, nor do all Tuvans maintain practices considered ‘authentically Tuvan’. An argument important for the understanding of this thesis is presented in *The Invention of Tradition*.

Hobsbawm and Ranger show that nationalisms invent new traditions, which seem very old, in order to establish legitimacy and build national cohesion. I argue that throat singing performances draw on Tuvan rural practices for their inspiration in order to present audiences with a romantic, idealized vision of Tuvan cultural heritage; however, the performers do not actually live such lives. These performances provide an “authentic” sense of *Tuvaness* to their audiences producing a nostalgic longing for and a moral anchor in a pre-modern past for many Tuvans, while others find the neo-traditionalist lifestyle and ethos incommensurate with their life experience and do not find that the content of such productions provides a compelling model for individual and societal development.

Lastly, I present contemporary, neo-traditionalist Tuvan identity as a counter narrative to modernity. Guided by Svetlana Boym’s interpretation of modernism’s attendant nostalgia as “the teleology of progress” (Boym 10), I postulate that tradition re-emerges in the post-Soviet context as antidote for the environmentally intrusive, interpersonally destructive and mentally dangerous experiences of everyday life in Tuva. Formerly presented as an iron cage, tradition is idealized as a solution to the social, psychological, environmental and economic challenges faced by contemporary Tuvans.

The central concerns of the thesis are explored in four major sections. In the introduction, I situate the study in geographical, cultural-historical and musicological contexts and argue for a retelling of the popular historical narrative concerning the role Tuvans played in the establishment of the Soviet Union. Most historical accounts of Soviet Tuva portray Tuvans as innocent, passive victims of Soviet colonization and account for Tuvans involved in the establishment of the Tuvan ASSR by framing Tuvan communists as brainwashed idealists dominated by the Moscow bureaucratic apparatus. Following the work of Yuri Slezkine, Francine Hirsche, and Bruce Grant, I show that some Tuvan officials willfully engaged the Soviet state, using Soviet “cultural technologies of rule” to increase their own political power and improve the quality of life for their citizens. Such a retelling complicates and deepens the possible historical roles Tuvans play, returns agency and responsibility to contemporary Tuvan officials, and shows that contemporary Tuvan officials and cultural experts make claims to static, cultural continuity as a strategy of increasing their perceived legitimacy. The above framework sets the stage for my exploration of throat singing and cultural legitimacy in performance.

Chapter one provides analysis of the networks of power and authority, which interconnect commonly referenced sources of knowledge about Tuvan throat singing and other “authentic” Tuvan cultural practices. These sources—books, websites, performances, a documentary film, CD liner notes, and the individuals involved in their production—comprise a substantial portion of contemporary public discourse that

represents Tuva and its musical practices to the English speaking world. The discourse also serves to produce “experts” and “expert knowledge” of throat singing.

Chapter two shows how academic, fan, and aficionado discourse of Tuvan culture produced in books, online, and during workshops and performances forms an “authentic”, homogeneous, romanticized and spiritualized pan-Asian identity centered around the practices of throat singing, shamanism, and nomadism. I analyze tropes common to most sources of knowledge about Tuva and set them within a critically analytic framework that deconstructs the modernist bias as a dialectic that demands the presence of an authentic past due to heavy ideological reliance on progressive development on both individual and societal levels. The tropes of Tuvan discourse present Tuva as a culturally and ecologically pure pre-modern, pre-industrial nostalgic home of authenticity, imbued with the values of boundlessness, spontaneity, and authentic expression.

Chapter three offers an explanation as to why the public discourse focused on Tuvan throat singing locates the “authentic” in rural Tuva, why throat singing is so often aligned with the spiritual, the healing, and the eternal, and why such conceptions serve to benefit the careers of those involved with the production of Tuvan neo-traditionalism.

This chapter also explores whether or not representing Tuva with an idealized and romanticized image places Tuvans and related ethnic groups at a disadvantage socially, politically, and economically.

## **Introduction**

### **THE GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT**

The Republic of Tuva<sup>1</sup> is one of the southern most republics of the Russian Federation bordered by Mongolia to the south, and other federal entities: Altai Republic and Khakassia to the west, Krasnoyarskii Krai to the north, Irkutsk Republic and Buriyatia to the east. On the southern edge of Siberia, Tuva is situated in the geographic center of the Asian continent. The republic is roughly the size of North Dakota at 65,830 square miles. The fifth longest river in the world, the Yenesei, finds its headwaters in central Tuva and flows north through Siberia to the Arctic Circle. Three mountain ranges—Altai, Sayan, and Tannu-ola—circumscribe the interior regions of Tuva, which comprise boreal forest, tundra, rolling hills and grazing, and a sand desert. The climate is continental: summer time highs can reach over 100 degrees Fahrenheit while winter time lows drop below -60 (Krueger 19–21).

### **THE HISTORICAL CONTEXTS**

#### **Formation of the Tuvan ASSR**

Mongol bureaucrats held the region now referred to as the Republic of Tuva in feudal relation to Manchurian China from 1757 until the 1911 Chinese revolution. During

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<sup>1</sup> [See a map of Tuva here.](#)

this time, the region's population comprised several clans of varying Turkic and Mongol ethnicity, which were organized into zones of taxation overseen by Oirat Mongol lords<sup>2</sup> (Vainshtein 41). During the scuffle for reterritorialization following the 1911 Chinese revolution, the region became a protectorate of the Tsar by way of Mongol agreements with Moscow.

Official relations with the Russian empire were carried out through the minimal Slavic Russian colonial presence in the region, which established itself in the mid 1860s as Russian traders, explorers and Old Believers moved across the Sayan Mountains from Altai and Krasnoyarskii krai (Rupen 614). Russia returned bureaucratic control of Mongolia to China under the 1913 and 1915 Sino-Russian treaties, but the region remained a protectorate of the Tsar (Reid 101). Rapid transference of governmental authority and mounting pressure from impending social upheaval in Russia destabilized Russian and Mongol claims to local authority. The region became an embattled and contested territory.

As the October Revolution of 1917 spread across the former territories of the Tsar, combat forces representing multiple interests maneuvered through Tuva vying for control of Russia's eastern colonies. An administrative body emerged from the leaderless clans and formed the Tuvan People's Army, which fought along side the Red Army forcing Chinese and Tsarist forces out of Tuva. Following the armed conflict, Tuva was no longer yoked to distant feudal governments, and factions within the nascent Tuvan government competed for control (Alatalu 883).

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<sup>2</sup> See Kruger, Mongush, and Lamazhaa for thick description of the pre-Soviet clan system.

Tuva declared independence from Russia in 1919 and by 1921 became an officially recognized “independent” state. Dominant Soviet bureaucrats within the Tuvan government who were subject to Moscow initially conceived the People’s Republic of Tannu-Tuva as destined for inclusion into the USSR; however, some Tuvan governmental officials contested Stalinist anti-religious repression in the 1930s and generated enough popular support in Tuva to declare Lamaism the official national religion (Walters 24). By the late 1930s Soviet factions within the Tuvan government quelled anti-Soviet ideological resistance and religious leaders as well as politicians that supported the maintenance of a national religion were ousted and shot (Reid 103).

In 1944 the Tuvan People’s Republic requested entry to the USSR as an Autonomous Oblast. Tuvan and Russian administrative units were combined into a single apparatus, paving the way for increased Russian settlement in the region. A Tuvan urban intelligencia and professional class rapidly developed around the Soviet bureaucratic body as collective farms were established and the Tuvan capital was industrialized (Vainshtein 45). In 1961, the Tuvan Autonomous Oblast was refigured as the Tuvan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Rupen 613).

### **State Sponsored Evolutionism**

Following the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the establishment of the League of Nations, nationhood became the world’s most prestigious form of governance (Hirsch 5). As theocratic, monarchical empires collapsed and boundaries of inchoate nation states

were traced across the globe, Bolshevik ideologues raced to define the borders of the nascent Soviet state. The establishment of the emerging Soviet nation's geographic borders required and precipitated the formation of a Soviet national identity. Core to Soviet identity was a deep belief in scientific progress attendant on modernist, industrial nation-state development (McCauley 4).

Soviet ideologues recognized the mobilizing power rhetoric of progress and advancement demonstrated in the nation state projects of Europe and America. The promise of an inevitable arrival of a future good rapidly formed national consciousness and fostered theretofore-unseen explosions of industrialization and material production. The peasant serfs repressed by the Tsarist regime likewise recognized the posterity promised by industrialization and nation state formation, and made unanswered demands for education reform and the development of worker's rights. The Bolsheviks capitalized on these demands and developed their own progressive rhetoric, promising fulfillment of the workers and the dissolution of repressive theocratic rule in Russia (Thompson 5).

The Bolshevik party based their ideology of progress on Karl Marx's timeline of socio-historical development. Marx's theory found its roots in social evolutionary thinking of the 19th century and posits that societal organizational schemes, like living organisms, were subject to evolutionary forces. The timeline identifies five possible societal organizational schemes and asserts that all human groups inevitably move through each of these stages on their way toward post-industrial communism, which-according to Marx-represented the most evolved and ideal form of governance (Grant 11).

The Leninist interpretation of Marx's timeline asserted that societal evolutionary changes not only signified adaptive change from former organizational schemes but measurable positive advances and improvements in the overall cultural and material life of the evolving society. The Bolsheviks believed that humans had become conscious of the forces that drive society through an inevitable and scientifically described process of evolution (Humphrey 73); therefore, it was determined that Soviet social and cultural engineers should consciously guide and accelerate Soviet society through the stages of evolution to the ultimate expression of societal organization and governance embodied in the communist ideal.

The development of a progressive, advanced national identity requires the existence of its opposite: a non-progressive, primitive identity. In order to substantially solidify a progressive identity for Soviet citizens and prove the validity of Marx's theory of social development, non-progressive societies were identified and described. Soviet ideologues recognized the potential in mobilizing the popular belief developed during Tsarist colonial expansion that the native populations of Russia's Far East were primitive and undeveloped relative to the high cultures of Europe and European Russia (Diment and Slezkine 227). Since the first Novgorodian explorers made their way beyond the Ural Mountains in the late 11th century, the native peoples of Siberia and the Far East have been described as primitive savages lacking cultural sophistication and civility for reasons innate and biologically determined. These claims justified Russian colonial expansion and exploitation of native lands and peoples (Slezkine 1; 11).



Soviet ideologues agreed that native peoples of Siberia and the Far East were culturally and materially inferior to European and Slavic Russian societies, but denounced the biologically deterministic claims made by Tsarist colonists. The Soviets maintained that native populations lived in culturally and materially impoverished conditions because of wanton feudal exploitation carried out by Tsarist and Manchurian bureaucrats and native shamanic power structures. By undermining the belief that native populations were forever doomed to a primitive, impoverished existence, the Bolsheviks cleverly extended the possibility of inclusion into the Soviet State to native peoples of Siberia and the Russian Far East, while morally subverting the structures of power that governed native populations (Anderson 76).

The Soviet assertion that societal and cultural development is not biologically determined was also used as an ideological attack on the biologically deterministic stance taken by the Nazis and the United States. The Soviets attempted to place themselves on moral high ground vis-à-vis European and American powers by positioning themselves in the 'nurture' camp of the famous 'nature versus nurture' debate. The Soviet position assumed that all human potential is born out through social cultivation, and that all humans possess nearly identical physical and psychological faculties (Grant xi; 11). This ideological stance undermines any attempt at establishing a biologically grounded argument in support of racial delineation and discrimination.

Ironically, the Soviet assertion that native groups of eastern Russia lived in barbaric, primitive cultural conditions—even if these conditions were not biologically determined—betrays a Eurocentric chauvinism equal in effect to the positions held by the

Nazis and the United States. Native groups were told that their cultural practices were ‘backward’ relative to the high culture of European nation states and the Russian cultural centers of Moscow and Leningrad. Inclusion into the Soviet ‘brotherhood’ promised an elevation above ignorance and depravity into scientific liberation, enlightenment, and progress (McCauley 13). This project-though it denounced the biologically deterministic ideologies promulgated by the Nazis and the United States- still served to perpetuate Eurocentric misapprehensions of the sophistication of the cultures of native groups, and perpetuated the same dialectically oppositional frameworks of thought that supported enlightenment era colonial projects and their attendant orientalist biases (Hirsch 10).

In her recent work *Empire of Nations*, Francine Hirsch shows the role Soviet ethnography played in the development of Soviet identity by establishing native peoples as primitive others relative to the Soviet cultural ideal. Extrapolating Benedict Anderson’s theory of the operation of “cultural technologies of rule”, Hirsch describes how the progressive ideology of the Soviets utilized ethnographic productions—censuses, ethnographies and museums— to craft the identity of native peoples as populations in flux (Hirsch 14).

Soviet social and cultural engineers developed and deployed strategies that would consciously assist and accelerate the evolution of native peoples through the Marxist socio-historical timeline (Hirsch 13). These strategies did not simply replace local, native culture with European cultural productions as such immediate impositions would be criticized as evidence of Soviet cultural imperialism. Rather, Soviet social engineers

developed cultural productions that materially evidenced the cultural ‘evolution’ of native peoples toward the Soviet ideal<sup>3</sup>.

These newly formed cultural practices maintained some semblance of their pre-Soviet form in order to signify to the international stage that the Soviets were not constructing an oppressive colonial empire; rather, they were assisting native people’s integration into modern life. This strategy reduced native peoples to a belittled stereotype that reinforced the claims to progressive development posited by the Soviet regime, while perpetuating native peoples’ marginality in order to further exploit their ‘backward’ image in support of the ideological project of the USSR<sup>4</sup>.

At this point in Tuva’s popular historical narrative, many accounts of the development of the Tuvan ASSR neglect to mention the role Tuvan politicians and revolutionaries played in the formation of the Soviet Union, or historians frame those Tuvans involved as either passive victims of modernity or self interested and diabolical traitors fallen victim to the collusive rhetorical power of Soviet propaganda. For example, Manchen-Helfen- an Austrian scholar and explorer who visited the People’s Republic of Tannu-Tuva in 1929- wrote of Tuvan youth he termed “human bombs”. These revolutionaries were educated in Moscow’s Communist University of Toilers of the East and arrived in Tuva exploding local power structures, paving the way for Soviet propaganda and revolutionary thought (Reid pg. 103).

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<sup>3</sup> See the below section “National in Form, Soviet in Content” for a more detailed discussion of the use of material changes to evidence the success of state sponsored evolutionism.

<sup>4</sup> Said’s argument developed in *Orientalism* is equally applicable in the Soviet case. Native peoples of Siberia and the Russian Far East served as objectified ideological objects that justified the expansion of Soviet power.

This line of argument produces revolutionary Tuvans as agent-less subjects, unable to either consciously reject or willfully deploy Soviet ideological projects, and furthers the same colonial dialectics that frame Tuvans and other native peoples as passive, unreflective victims of ‘Western’ thought. Such an approach creates the sense of the existence of a naïve, static Tuvan identity, penetrated and destroyed by an encroaching, violent Soviet identity and further reinforces the primitivist image of native people initially deployed by colonial forces to justify the apprehension of native lands and resources.

Slezkine and Hirsch’s histories of the construction of the Soviet Union complicate the simplified, victimized view of native peoples and recast them as intentional actors.

Hirsch provides significant insight into the ways deployment of Soviet ideology through ethnographic means benefited native leaders. Her work shows that native governmental officials were solicited for consultations by the Moscow based ethnographic commission that was charged with the task of cataloguing the ethnicities of the USSR and describing each ethnicity’s level of societal development according to Marx’s socio-historical timeline. In the interest of generating a manageable official list of nationalities within the USSR, many “diminutive groups” were subsumed into larger ethnic groups, and thereby increased the political power and geographic resource bases of local leaders.

Slezkin’s work shows that many native citizens desired urbanization, industrialization, and collectivization, and demanded that local leaders request entry into the USSR. In this way, maintenance of political power required local leaders to engage the Soviet state. Far from naïve and disconnected with the industrializing world, many

native peoples were proactive in the implementation and development of Soviet modernization projects within their own territories.

Once the ethnographic commission codified Soviet ethnic identities, boundaries of the autonomous ‘ethnic’ republics were drawn and local governments were required to develop cultural productions that displayed a defining national character of their republics. According to Soviet rhetoric, these cultural productions provided spiritual nourishment for the population of each republic and fostered unity across the multiethnic cultures of the USSR. Ideologically, these productions signified the successful deployment of state sponsored evolutionism by evidencing the rapid ‘advancement’ of the populations of the ethnic republics toward the high cultural ideal of the Soviets.

### **National in Form, Socialist in Content**

The Moscow based Soviet ethnographic commission mandated the construction of “Houses of Culture” in ‘ethnic’ republics of Central Asia, Siberia, and the Russian Far East to inculcate the dictates of state sponsored evolutionism into local populations (Frolova-Walker 334). Houses of culture educated local communities by way of courses, theatrical and musical productions, and diorama displays; all of which furthered the Soviet worldview based on Marx’s historical timeline (Levin 17–18). Stalin’s imperative for the production of Socialist Realist art—that all Soviet artistic productions must be rendered “national in form, socialist in content”—was strictly applied to cultural productions displayed and performed in houses of culture.

The development of cultural productions that were national in form, socialist in content completed three strategic, ideological tasks. First, the Soviet Union was able to present itself as an egalitarian union of nationalities, each of which possessed equivalent opportunity for self-determination. Second, local leaders developed national signs and historical narratives for their respective republics that fit within Soviet progressive rhetoric, which simultaneously increased local political power and centralized Soviet power. Lastly, the central Soviet government was able to undermine nationalist separatist movements by reinforcing the ideological rhetoric that rewarded and encouraged the continual ‘evolution’ of nationalities toward the high cultural standard of the Soviet future. In this way Soviet cultural policy—for all of its claims to egalitarian leveling of imperialist, cultural hierarchies—continued to produce European culture as superior to the cultures of Siberia and the Russian Far East (Frolova-Walker 335).

Musical production in the Tuvan houses of culture concretely illustrates the ways in which Soviet state sponsored evolutionism—by way of the mandate national in form, socialist in content—was manifested in cultural production. Soviet administrators in the Tuvan government targeted Tuvan music for re-imagination because of its fundamental discordance with the aesthetic aims of European music. European classical music produces melody through relative pitch height between congealed whole notes. Tuvan music focuses on the timbral characteristics of a single note and produces melody by manipulating the constituent harmonic frequencies within a fundamental pitch<sup>5</sup>. Tuvan

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<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of the timbral focus of Tuvan music, see the below section *Tuvan Throat Singing: A Technical Introduction*.

music was seen as backward and unrefined as a result of this fundamental aesthetic distinction (Levin 46–58).

Tuvan instruments were hybridized with European classical instruments in order to materially evidence the evolution of the Tuvan people toward the Soviet ideal. For example, the Tuvan instrument *igil* is a two stringed, bowed fiddle that is held in the lap and played with a technique similar to *flageolette* <sup>6</sup>. The *igil* is a relatively quiet instrument as a result of the heavy focus on harmonic manipulation Tuvan musical aesthetics require. The cello, by contrast, is built to fulfill the European classical aesthetic demands of volume, clarity and projection. Soviet ideologues claimed that the *igil* illustrated the primitive condition of Tuvan culture because of the instrument's diminutive size and quiet volume (Levin 48).

To assist the evolution of Tuvan music toward the Soviet cultural ideal embodied by European classical orchestral music, Soviet luthiers produced an instrument that maintained the *igil*'s tear shape, but had four strings, a wider and deeper resonator body, and a European style scroll atop the tuning board. Other Tuvan instruments, such as the *doshpoluur*, *bazanchy*, and *chanzy* were likewise subjected to Soviet 'evolutionary' ideology and re-imagined to meet the aesthetic sensibilities of European classical music.

Orchestras performed European classical scores influenced by native melodies on hybridized instruments while dressed in national costumes in order to illustrate the

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<sup>6</sup> See Levin and Suzukei's discussion of the ways in which Soviet luthiers hybridized Tuvan instruments with European instruments in order to meet the aesthetic demands of European classical music.

success of Soviet cultural policies and shape local musical practice<sup>7</sup>. As the new Soviet-Tuvan culture developed in the 1940s and 1950s, Soviet officials criminalized public performance of pre-Soviet musical practices endemic to the region. Tuvans who continued to perform Tuvan musical instruments and throat sing were accused of counter-revolutionary bourgeois nationalism. In this way, Soviet performance mandates integrated pre-Soviet Tuvan musical practices—through their very banishment—into the ideological project of the Soviet Union and assisted in the creation of a Tuvan national identity.

### **The Development of Tuvan Ensemble Music**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s Soviet cultural policy began to relax as the national economy tumbled toward the ossified nadir of Brezhnev stagnation. It became brutally clear that the Soviet revolution would not deliver its promised international, communist utopia, and citizens of the Soviet Union experienced nostalgic yearnings for the pre-Soviet past (Tompson 109). Ironically, the imagined primitive past of native peoples that grounded the policies of state sponsored evolutionism emerged as resource for the construction of post-Soviet identities.

The Tuvan national character developed under the mandates of state sponsored evolutionism provided a mythos and litany of national signs to the Tuvan imaginary. Performers on stages of the houses of culture were clothed in costumes that borrowed

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<sup>7</sup> See A.N. Aksenov's work *Тувинская Народная Музыка (Tuvan Folk Music)* for the history of Soviet adaptation of Tuvan music.



aesthetic devices from various epochs of the region's pre-Soviet history, which began to symbolize the resurgence of pre-Soviet Tuvan identity to many Tuvans. Musicians who continued to play pre-Soviet instruments and throat sing in private against Soviet cultural policy began to perform in public space. Subsequently, throat singing and pre-Soviet musical instruments were integrated into orchestral performances in houses of culture.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s musicians who performed in the Tuvan houses of culture formed the first national ensemble that included throat singing and non-hybridized Tuvan instruments. The ensemble *Sayan* drew its name from the *Sayan* mountain chain in northern Tuva, and began to publically align 'authentic' Tuvan identity with throat singing and pre-Soviet instruments. In this way, throat singing musicians—and the discourse that rapidly grew up around their performances—developed a neo-traditionalist Tuvan identity in lieu of declining popular identification with the Soviet project.

Several members of the *Sayan* ensemble subsequently formed the most famous of contemporary Tuvan throat singing ensembles: *Huun Huur Tu*. This group began to tour outside of Russia in the mid 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union. The broad international exposure *Huun Huur Tu* enjoyed brought much attention to Tuvan musical practices, and engendered international interest in Tuva's history. *Huun Huur Tu* dressed in costumes initially conceived by cultural authorities employed in the houses of culture, played instruments similar in construction to pre-Soviet instruments and performed songs that emphasize the use of throat singing. The group carried with them the neo-traditionalist historical narrative that imagined a pre-Soviet Tuvan identity centered on

throat singing practice, nomadic life ways, and a romanticized spiritualism that connects Tuvans to their surrounding landscapes. The members of *Huun Huur Tu* thus functioned as cultural ambassadors and curators for post-Soviet Tuvan identity.

The neo-traditionalist historical narrative circulated by *Huun Huur Tu* and scholars who collaborated with these musicians generated a significant international following. International interest in Tuva has further validated the historical narrative told by neo-traditionalist musicians and scholars, creating a feedback loop into contemporary Tuvan society. I argue that the neo-traditionalist performative model contemporary Tuvan ensemble musicians produce is not a re-emergence of an age old practice suppressed by Soviet cultural policies; rather, Tuvan musicians are developing a new form of identity that answers specific challenges emergent in the post-Soviet historical context, and their historical narrative is validated and gains persuasive capital amongst Tuvans today because of its success abroad.

### **Post-Soviet Social and Economic Crisis**

The citizens of the Russian federation faced severe crises of identity following the dissolution of the formerly unitary state. Ideological currents of progressive development toward the bright light of a utopian, homogenized socialist future retreated unveiling economic crisis and civil unrest. Post-Soviet citizens required new narratives of identity to combat the aimlessness engendered by increasingly fragmented social and historical life. Overwhelming nostalgia and a sense of loss gave rise to nationalist sentiments whose

polemics nurtured tension and conflict between many ethnic groups that formerly comprised the ‘brotherhood’ of Socialist Republics (Strayer 162).

Amidst the upheaval and confusion, a profound longing for ‘authentic’ sources of identity intensified amongst many ethnic groups across the former Soviet Union. Pre-Soviet ‘primitive’ societies were reimagined as an escape from the deleterious economic, social and environmental conditions of post-Soviet Russia. Rural lifestyles came to symbolize a romantic, simplistic escape from the burdens of urban life, and provided a source of authority and legitimacy for emergent post-Soviet nationalities who sought to anchor their identity in a static, continuous ‘tradition’ undisturbed by Soviet cultural policies.

Contemporary Tuvan cultural producers inherited the Soviet model of cultural production and reversed the assumption that pre-Soviet primitivism should be abandoned in an effort to evolve toward modernity; rather, many Tuvan neo-traditionalists assert that tradition and its primitive simplicity holds a solution to the extreme challenges left in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Throat singing, nomadic pastoralism, and other rural practices now signify a distinctly Tuvan identity in opposition to an ethnically Russian Soviet identity.

The performance model provided by *Huun Huur Tu* has been inherited and adapted by a second generation of Tuvan throat singers. The ensembles *Chirglinchin*, *Alash*, and *Tyva Kyzы* have successfully established tour circuits in the United States and Europe. Not surprisingly, Tuvan ensemble musicians enjoy tremendous popularity amongst New Age audiences whose spiritualized, back to nature ethos finds common ground with the

post-Soviet neo-traditionalist historical narrative Tuvan ensembles produce. It is at the confluence of post-Soviet Tuvan neo-traditionalism and contemporary American and European New Age worldviews that my thesis finds its historical and musicological context.

### **TUVAN THROAT SINGING: A TECHNICAL INTRODUCTION**

While Tuvan musicians living in the USSR traveled to socialist and communist countries throughout the 20th century, Tuvan music only reached American and European performance venues following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loosening of travel restrictions imposed on former Soviet citizens. While Tuvan musicians have achieved local and regional fame in Russia for performances of genres such as rock, pop and European classical, Tuva has achieved international recognition for its endemic musical practice *khomei*, termed throat singing in English. In throat singing, a single vocalist produces multiple audible pitches simultaneously. Throat singing comprises two core techniques and several ornaments or sub-styles, which modulate the two core styles.

### **Khomei**

The Tuvan word *khoomei*<sup>8</sup> refers not only to the overall practice of throat singing, but to one of the two core techniques. In the style *khoomei*, the singer produces a sustained pitch while modulating the sound by applying a slight and minutely controlled amount of tension to the larynx by engaging a pair of muscles lining the vocal tract. The sound produced is constricted and raspy relative to the open throated technique of choral or operatic singing. The singer often uses this style to create structural contrast between one verse and another, or to mark the chorus of a song; however, this is not always the case. Some songs are performed in their entirety in the *khoomei* voice and in others *khoomei* is entirely absent.

The singer can utilize the harmonic refraction of the vocal fundamental achieved in *khoomei* to produce polyphonic, melodic vocalizations. The singer sustains the tone while manipulating the pharynx, hyoid bone and the larynx in concert with one another in order to cause constituent harmonic frequencies naturally present in the fundamental to become audible as simultaneous pitches distinct from the fundamental. A skillful throat singer is then able to manipulate the vocal tract into vowel positions that correspond with specific harmonic frequencies thereby producing distinct melody lines above the still audible background drone of the sustained fundamental

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<sup>8</sup> Ayan-ool Sam of the *Alash* ensemble performs the style *khoomei* [in this clip](#).

## **Kargyraa**

The style of *kargyraa*<sup>9</sup> is produced when a singer simultaneously engages the vocal chords and ventricular folds. The ventricular folds are located just above the larynx and vibrate at exactly half the speed of the vocal chords, thus the note produced is exactly one octave below the note produced by the vocal chords. As in *khoomei*, *kargyraa* can be used to sing lyrics in specific sections of a song, lyrics for the entire duration of a song, or be completely absent.

The overtone melodies of *kargyraa* are less focally perceptible than those of *khoomei*. Since two sound sources are simultaneously utilized, the singer has accessible double the amount of harmonic content available in the style of *khoomei*; however, the *bass profundo* fundamental produces overtones that are situated closer to the fundamental vocal pitch produced by the vocal chords. The singer manipulates these overtones by augmenting his vocal tract into vowel positions as in *khoomei*, and moves the lips and jaw into vowel shapes that correspond to harmonics that form the overtone melody line.

## **Ornaments/Sub-styles**

The most commonly utilized ornament of *khoomei* is called *sygyt*<sup>10</sup>. In *sygyt*, the singer produces a sustained *khoomei* voice while simultaneously cupping the tongue to the roof of the mouth, sealing it along the alveolar ridge, while leaving a small gap toward the rear on either side of the mouth in order for sound to escape through the

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<sup>9</sup> Bady Dorzhu Ondar of the *Alash* ensemble performs the style *kargyraa* [in this clip](#).

<sup>10</sup> Ayan-ool Sam performs the ornament *sygyt* applied to the style *khoomei* [in this clip](#).

molars. The tongue further diminishes the fundamental drone thus increasing the audibility of the overtone note. The result is a nearly inaudible drone coupled with a bright, flute-like overtone note that skilled singers utilize to produce melody.

In most of the throat singing literature, *sygyt* is considered a core technique, independent of *khoomi* and *kargyraa*; however, the physiological research on throat singing technique shows that *sygyt* is produced by cupping the tongue to the roof of the mouth, while producing overtones using the *khoomi* technique. As sound is produced in the throat using the *khoomi* technique, I contend that *sygyt* should not be considered an independent core style; rather, *sygyt* should be considered an ornament of *khoomi*.

Another commonly utilized ornament-*borbangnadyr*<sup>11</sup>- can be applied to both *khoomi* and *kargyraa*. This technique produces an undulating overtone that takes on a muted, pulsating quality in the style of *kargyraa* and a bright shimmering timbre when applied to *khoomi*. The focal presence of the overtone note produced by *khoomi* can also be amplified by the *sygyt* technique while also singing *borbangnadyr*. The result is a bright, flute like overtone that undulates above the vocal fundamental reminiscent of bird song, or as some singers suggest, the sound of water rolling over submerged stones in a mountain stream.

*Ezengileer*<sup>12</sup> is also a commonly deployed ornament to the styles *khoomi* and *kargyraa* and is also often used in conjunction with the ornament *sygyt*. Throat singers produced the ornament *ezengileer* by pulsing the velum while singing any of the core

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<sup>11</sup> Bady Dorzhu Ondar performs the ornament *borbangnadyr* coupled with *sygyt* and *khoomi* [in this clip](#).

<sup>12</sup> Ayan-ool Sam demonstrates the ornament, *ezengileer* coupled with *sygyt* [in this clip](#).

styles. The velum is the part of our articulatory tract that directs sound into the nasal canal. For instance, the velum is engaged when articulating the nasalized consonant in the word *song*. Pushing the velum directs sound alternately to the mouth and nasal canal resulting in a rhythmic pulse along side the overtone melodies the singer produces.



## **Chapter One: Speaking for Tuvans**

Since 2006, I have participated in and observed public discourse about Tuva in the capacities of hobbyist throat singing performer and instructor, and volunteer facilitator for the Tuvan ensemble *Alash*. As I developed friendships with the *Alash* musicians, I quickly realized that many of my preconceived notions about who they were and what their music represented were strikingly incommensurate with the musicians' personalities and their reported lived realities. My experiences with Tuvan musicians challenged my unconsciously held assumptions about Tuvan life and prompted the realization that much of my previous knowledge about Tuvan culture and music disadvantaged Tuvans social and economically by reducing contemporary Tuvan identity to a romantic stereotype.

This chapter explores sources of knowledge about Tuva produced by contributors to the discourse that have grown up around contemporary Tuvan throat singing ensembles. The web work of references which form the discourse about Tuvans is far too complex and interconnected to wholly represent in this short chapter, and is a task, to an idealized "completion" of which, I feign no pretension. Limiting my analysis to the sources below serves as an expedient, if abbreviated, introduction to the most prominent actors which curate and represent to English speaking publics worldwide the following: Tuvan throat singing, contemporary Tuvan identity, and identities of peoples ethnically related to Tuvans that have been aligned with contemporary Tuvan identity by way of works produced by a handful of individuals.

**OVERTONE SINGING: PHYSICS AND METAPHYSICS OF HARMONICS EAST AND WEST    BY MARK VAN TONGEREN**

Mark van Tongeren is known to many throat singing fans and aficionados as an expert throat singer and a source of accurate historical and ethno-musicological knowledge about Tuvan culture as well as other cultures that practice forms of throat singing. Van Tongeren holds an M.A. degree in ethnomusicology from the University of Amsterdam and is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Leiden. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in the Republic of Tuva and several other Siberian republics. The breadth of his experience and depth of his devotion to the dissemination of information about throat singing evidences his professional approach to the study of Tuvan cultural productions.

Van Tongeren most prominently entered the public discourse surrounding Tuvan throat singing ensembles in 2002 with the self-publication of his work *Overtone Singing: Physics and Metaphysics of Harmonics East and West*. While his work does present valuable historical data concerning the development of Tuvan throat singing ensembles and the emergence of throat singing communities in Europe and America, his essentializing and mystifying approach to the study of throat singing techniques across many cultures and historical epochs reduces people who practice throat singing to a romanticized and heavily spiritualized stereotype.

As implicit in the title, van Tongeren's book explores the relationships between overtone singing and a broad range of disciplines and peoples. Van Tongeren begins his work with a discussion of the physics of sound: in particular he focuses on harmonics and

their constituent relationship to whole notes. According to van Tongeren, the goal of “Western” music is to produce finely tuned whole notes that totally conceal the delineations between their constituent harmonics. Tuvan music, by contrast, seeks to splice apart whole notes into their constituent harmonics and develop multiple melodies and harmonies within single whole notes.

Van Tongeren asserts that European classical musical praxis distorts the universal purity of harmonic frequencies by concealing harmonics in the pursuit of congealed whole notes. His claim is an attempt to locate a pre-cultural, materially based, universal truth, in which to ground his metaphysical claims about harmonic singing. By using the harmonic series—a scale of sonic measurement physicists developed for mapping harmonic frequencies—as a claim to scientific objective truth, van Tongeren attempts to establish the harmonic series as a natural order that exists outside of constructed knowledge<sup>13</sup>:

“Harmonics per se have no connection with a specific country, tribe, musical style or historical epoch. They are not owned by anybody, neither were they ‘invented’ at a given place and time. They are the same universally: your overtones are not essentially different from mine” (Tongeren 238).

Working from what he perceives to be an objective and universal truth, van Tongeren describes the ways in which vocal harmonics-across all cultures which utilize them-allow practitioners an experience akin to Freud’s oceanic state that exists beyond the obfuscating lenses created by “the analytic state of mind” (Tongeren 260).

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<sup>13</sup> Van Tongeren draws from Huston Smith’s conception of the roll of overtones vis-a-vis “the spiritual quest”[in this segment of Smith’s documentary, \*Requiem for a Faith\*](#). See the [full documentary here](#).

Van Tongeren claims that the “West” once had knowledge of the fundamental relationship between the harmonic series and the ultimate constitution of the universe as evidenced by the writings of the Pythagoreans and Plato’s music of the spheres. He intimates that a few conservative sects of Christian monks and Tibetan Buddhist sects, such as the Gyuto, all of which maintain an overtone or chant tradition, still secretly possess this knowledge. In the book’s conclusion, he asserts that it is only now that science, through the development of superstring theory in the field of physics, is rediscovering this age-old knowledge. Here Van Tongeren draws from Tran Quang Hai<sup>14</sup>’s documentary *Song of Harmonics*<sup>15</sup>, which concludes with the rhetorical question: “Has the West thus discovered spiritual and therapeutic value in bi-phonic singing that may have been traditional in Central Asia?”

While much of Overtone Singing is plagued by the problems of essentialism, van Tongeren presents a thorough history of overtone singing in Europe and America since the 1970s. He pays close attention to the ways in which overtone singing in the “West” is constructed through discourse as a tool for healing, meditation and gaining insight into life’s mysteries. As such, this work represents a historical contribution to the study of the development of contemporary overtone singing communities in Europe and America. For example, in the section entitled “West” van Tongeren presents an interview he

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<sup>14</sup> Tran Quang Hai is an ethnomusicologist whose primary research focuses on Vietnamese folk music. He gained international visibility in the throat singing community after the production in 1990 of his documentary on throat singing entitled *Song of Harmonics* in which he claims to have discovered the physiological techniques that make throat singing possible. In the documentary, Hai invites several throat singers from Mongolia to a physics lab in Paris where the musicians undergo x-ray and MRI scans while throat singing.

<sup>15</sup> See [a preview to Hai’s documentary here](#).

conducted with Theodore Levin<sup>16</sup>. Van Tongeren quotes Levin's account of Levin's time as a member of David Hykes' Harmonic Choir<sup>17</sup> to show how practitioners in the "West" talk about and practice overtone singing. Levin is quoted:

"We were students of Gurjieff's<sup>18</sup> teaching which involved work on oneself. A kind of psychological work on oneself in order to escape from our adherence to the mechanical laws that kept us from realizing our full potential as humans, to achieve a finer level of attention and a greater awareness of our place on earth... the way David talked about [the music] wasn't: move your tongue here and your jaw here and say UUUH. ...It was always couched in a language of attention to the body. He never put much emphasis on harmonics, ...It was about breathing, about the rhythm of the breath, about the silence and quiet in the body" (Tongeren 180).

Levin's quote illustrates the New-Age spiritualist interpretive approach that throat singing communities in Europe and America tend to deploy when discussing throat singing.

The broad scope of van Tongeren's writing coupled with the relative dearth of research focused on each of the cultural practices he attempts to represent has allowed him to speak on behalf of a wide range of communities. His work and professional opinion are often referenced on websites, in conversation, in official cultural and political policy documents, and academic works as legitimate sources for comprehensive knowledge of Tuvan throat singing and practices perceived as related found in communities world-wide. A Google search for Mark van Tongeren's<sup>19</sup> name produces a

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<sup>16</sup> See [Theodore Levin's faculty biographic page here](#).

<sup>17</sup> See [Harmonic Choir's website here](#).

<sup>18</sup> George Gurjieff was a New Age spiritualist writer and philosopher. His writings were highly influential in the development of famous New Age gurus such as [Osho](#). See [James Moore's biography of Gurjieff](#). See [the biographer's personal website](#). There is also [a website dedicated to the writings and teachings of George Gurjieff](#).

<sup>19</sup> See [van Tongeren's website here](#).

clear image of how seriously his authority as an expert of throat singing is taken by international cultural organizations, how his identity as an ethnomusicologist provides legitimacy to the organizations and individuals which recognize van Tongeren as such, and how his essentializing approach to the study of throat singing practices is perpetuated and reinforced by those who cite van Tongeren's work.

UNESCO's website provides documentation of van Tongeren's participation as an examiner and expert of Mongolian *tsuur* flute music at the fifth session of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage held in Nairobi, Kenya in November of 2010<sup>20</sup>. Van Tongeren provided a description of the *tsuur* tradition to the committee, summarized as follows:

"Tsuur is a vertical flute played with the voice that adds a continuous guttural sound, and is particularly developed by a small ethnic group, the Altai Uriankhai of Western Mongolia. Tsuur music has been a way to creatively respond to and reflect upon their natural habitat, the Altai Mountains. Its performances occur in the wider context of the nomadic ways of life, for example, while attending flocks at home, and during celebrations and rituals. Tsuur music not only requires special musical skills, it also involves specific listening skills. Imitations of the sound of water flowing downstream, of sand, wind and animals are essential sources for the interpretation of Tsuur repertoire" (UNESCO REPORT 65).

In his attestation to the committee, van Tongeren extends his essentializing approach to the study of throat singing in Tuva to the Uriankhai of Western Mongolia. Van Tongeren's title of expert examiner provides the committee with the assurance that the information he presents is factual and grounded in rigorous research methodologies.

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<sup>20</sup> Van Tongeren participated as an "expert" in the nomination process for Mongolian Tsuur music to UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage. See the documentation of van Tongeren's participation [here](#). This hyperlink will allow the reader to download a report of the UNESCO convention that van Tongeren advised. The pertinent information is found on page 65 of the document under item 448.

By accepting the claims that van Tongeren submitted, the committee's official UNESCO sponsorship confers international recognition and endorsement of van Tongeren's knowledge and expertise, and, by extension, the methods by which both were established. UNESCO's authority to implement its policy agendas is increased because UNESCO deploys van Tongeren's expert knowledge and thereby asserts UNESCO's authority to recognize such knowledge. The combination of the committee's preservationist agenda and the attestation of van Tongeren as expert witness have confirmed, created and ossified an essentialist and romanticized conception of a cultural practice and the associated identity of an entire ethnic group.

On the Smithsonian Folkways website, a video of van Tongeren<sup>21</sup> is displayed on its webpage devoted to throat singing. His video is one of three videos in which various throat singing techniques from communities around the world are performed. In his video, van Tongeren is granted the title of "an ethnomusicologist specializing in khoomei", performs throat singing, and gives a detailed technical analysis of the physical processes that make throat singing possible. In a second video, which represents Inuit throat singing, singers Karin and Kathy Kettler perform an Inuit throat singing practice and give commentary. They discuss the importance of the continuity of their tradition in terms of building community bonds; little technical knowledge of the practice is expressed. In the third video, Mongolian singer Sengedorj presents Mongolian throat singing, but does not offer commentary or explanation.

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<sup>21</sup> See [the Smithsonian Folkways throat singing webpage here](#).

Smithsonian Folkways gains the authority to represent throat singing practices developed by distinct communities world wide by endorsing Mark van Tongeren as an ethnomusicologist and consultant. Van Tongeren gains authority because he is endorsed as an expert by Smithsonian Folkways, which claims to have the authority to recognize and validate van Tongeren's expert knowledge. Smithsonian Folkways demonstrates their knowledge by providing summary sociocultural contexts for each of the traditions presented in the above described videos; however, the implication is clear: whatever the cultural context, throat singing is throat singing and Mark van Tongeren has the expert knowledge which allows him to understand the practices far more rationally and technically than any of the other featured practitioners. Thus, the essentializing methodology employed by van Tongeren in *Overtone Singing* is perpetuated by the video montage on the Smithsonian Folkways website.

Several academics also accord authority to Mark van Tongeren. Tran Quang Hai<sup>22</sup>—ethnomusicologist, composer and throat singing performer—features van Tongeren's biography as well as a positive review of van Tongeren's book on Hai's website<sup>23</sup>, thereby endorsing van Tongeren as expert and giving disciplinary credence to his work and professional authority. Hai gains authority by implying that he has the knowledge to evaluate and verify van Tongeren's representations of a wide range of cultural traditions.

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<sup>22</sup> [Tran Quang Hai's biography](#) asserts that Hai is "the greatest specialist in overtone singing in the world".

<sup>23</sup> See Tran Quan Hai's evaluation and endorsement of van Tongeren on one of [Hai's websites](#).



Tran Quang Hai also wrote the foreword to *Overtone Singing*, which serves as an endorsement of van Tongeren's work by Hai, and by extension the ethnomusicological community. In the foreword Hai claims that "*Overtone Singing* does justice to this multitude of cultural traditions and to the countless personalities that have contributed to the development of this way of singing". In this way, Hai leverages the authority of academic communities to establish both van Tongeren and himself as cultural experts of all cultures around the world which maintain a throat singing tradition, while simultaneously flattening the variation of cultural significance and praxis individuals accord throat singing in independent cultures.

Theodore Levin, in *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*, acknowledges the merits of van Tongeren's work and accords van Tongeren authority to represent throat singing traditions practiced in communities world-wide:

"Mark van Tongeren, a Dutch student of throat singing who wrote a lucid survey of overtone-centered music from the perspective of both a singer and an observer, noted that the density of harmonics in double phonation chanting 'allows for an enormous variation of timbral nuances'. Van Tongeren added that from his own experience as a singer, 'there are more variables at stake in kargyraa than in any other type of throat-or overtone-singing'" (Tongeren 63).

By acknowledging van Tongeren's work without critique, Levin claims to have the authority to recognize the quality of van Tongeren's observations of the entire array of cultures represented in *Overtone Singing*. Levin's endorsement of van Tongeren's work also lends legitimacy to both the worldview put forth in *Overtone Singing* and the methodologies van Tongeren used to create his work. In this way, Levin and van Tongeren curate a particular interpretation of Tuvan culture to the English-speaking world (Ames 59).

**WHERE RIVERS AND MOUNTAINS SING: SOUND, MUSIC AND NOMADISM IN  
TUVA AND BEYOND BY THEODORE LEVIN**

Theodore Levin is a successfully established ethnomusicologist whose research focuses on the “nomadic sound words of inner Asia”. Levin holds his M.F.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Princeton University and has received grants from numerous institutions, in support of his multiple, often extended, fieldwork stints in Central Asia and Siberia<sup>24</sup>. He has conducted research on Tuvan throat singing for over twenty years, visiting Tuva frequently. Levin’s professional approach to the study of throat singing positions him as one of the leading American scholars of Tuvan music. He currently teaches music and travel writing courses at Dartmouth University.

*Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*-and the book’s companion CD/DVD- follows the Tuvan ensemble *Huun Huur Tu*<sup>25</sup> on tour in the United States through shabby hotels, cramped performing venues, and shopping sprees at Wal-Mart. Theodore Levin carries out audio-visual recording projects with the members of *Huun Huur Tu* in caves situated amongst the pitches and slopes of Tuva’s rolling hills, on banks of babbling brooks as Tolya Kuular harmonizes with harmonics produced by water rolling over submerged stones, and captures the echo of Kaigal-ool Xovalyg’s tenor voice as it returns to the

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<sup>24</sup> See [an interview with Levin](#) published on Dartmouth’s official YouTube channel about his interests and research.

<sup>25</sup> See [Huun Huur Tu’s website here](#).

microphone from an adjacent cliff face. In the preface of his book, Levin succinctly states the goal of his ethnography:

“The kaleidoscopic musical world that is everyday fare for musicians from Tuva begs for a form of ethnographic description that can adequately represent it. How to convey the creative tensions that both inspire and bedevil those who move back and forth between their own communities and the West, between a sense of place and the jarring effect of displacement? Rather than generalize, my solution has been to particularize...”(Levin XIV).

As in van Tongeren, Levin’s book attempts to create an understanding of the use of harmonic singing across many cultures by way of an essentializing methodology<sup>26</sup> that he terms a “musical archeology”. Levin asserts that throat singing arose out of Inner Asian communities that cannot be adequately defined by modern nation-state boundaries. According to Levin, the spiritual relationship that nomads had with the land around them—and still have in the case of those who live in rural environments in Siberia and Central Asia—is reflected in the creative verve and dignified reverence for the natural environment found in throat singing music. Levin conceives of the musical relationship his imagined, pre-Soviet nomads had with their environment as a potential cure for the environmental and social crises engendered by Soviet industrialization in Siberia. Levin asserts that the reverential relationship to natural environments that throat singing promotes in its practitioners is under threat today as throat singing is groomed for the stage.

In his view, contemporary market demand and the Soviet cultural engineering policies of the twentieth century that continue to shape contemporary Tuvan throat

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<sup>26</sup> Levin is also influenced by Huston Smith’s analysis of throat singing as a symbolic embodiment of “the spiritual quest”. See pg. 64 in *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*.

singing ensemble music have endangered the continuity of what he describes as “the nomadic imagination’s ingenious transformation of landscape and soundscape into music” which “may provide a movement of clarity that connects us to our collective past—and if we listen carefully enough, to a future more in harmony with the environment that sustains our planet’s fragile experiment with human life” (Levin xv). In response to the threat Soviet modernity posed to the continuity of pre-Soviet Tuvan traditions and contemporary Siberian environments, Levin and the members of *Huun Huur Tu* decide to exhume ‘authentic’ Tuvan music by way of cultivating their own relationships with the natural environment of Tuva.

*Where Rivers and Mountains Sing* and the accompanying DVD/CD<sup>27</sup> produce a romanticized image of Tuvan throat singers and, by extension, all contemporary Tuvans. As a result of Levin’s thick description of his experiences with *Huun Huur Tu*—as well as Levin’s own insistence on the existence of a more pure, homogenous, and “halcyon” proto-Turkic past (Levin 72)—the romantic and spiritualized view of Tuva’s past that the members of *Huun Huur Tu* and Levin have jointly developed is perceived by readers as a synecdoche of all contemporary Tuvans’ beliefs. Such an approach flattens the lived experience of many Tuvans and stereotypes many Asiatic Russians as superstitious and naïve.

Though Levin’s work produces a romantic and whimsical image of pre-Soviet Tuvan life, he presents an intimate and sensitive view into the difficulties, successes,

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<sup>27</sup> The DVD which accompanies *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing* focuses its gaze on predominately rural lifestyles. Throat singers, shamans, and nomads abound but not a single glimpse is given into the urban life of contemporary Tuvans.

confusions, frustrations, and challenges experienced by the members of *Huun Huur Tu* on the road and at home in Tuva. As such, the book deserves recognition as a valuable, perceptive and thorough history of the development of thought and musical style amongst particular Tuvan throat singers since the late 1980s.

Levin has established his authority as an expert of Tuvan music by his extensive fieldwork. His first visit to Tuva was “an expedition” funded by *National Geographic*<sup>28</sup> (pg. XII) carried out in 1987. Levin gains authority by invoking the cultural capital implicit in carrying out a research project for *National Geographic*, while simultaneously constructing Tuva as marked by extremes: one only goes on ‘expeditions’ to places that pose a challenge to mobility and a threat to one’s life.

Levin’s role as a cultural consultant to several international agencies increases his authority and visibility as a cultural expert and representative of Central Asian and Siberian peoples. He serves as a consultant for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture<sup>29</sup>. The Aga Khan Trust increases its legitimacy as an internationally recognized agent for social change in Central Asia by invoking the cultural expertise Levin has accumulated in the duration of his career. Levin gains recognition for that expertise through his appointment as a consultant to the Aga Khan Trust. In his role as cultural consultant Levin builds his authority as an expert on multiple particular cultures as well as his identity as a cultural expert who understands abstract cultural truths that interconnect all Central Asian and Siberian cultures.

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<sup>28</sup> *National Geographic* did not publish the work Levin produced.

<sup>29</sup> See the [Aga Khan Foundation website here](#).

Levin is the presiding chair of the sub-board of Arts and Culture for the Soros Foundation<sup>30</sup>. As in the case of the Aga Khan Trust, the Soros Foundation gains legitimacy as an agent for social change by invoking the expertise of Levin and by claiming to have the knowledge and authority to recognize his expertise. Levin's legitimacy as an expert of multiple cultures is increased by the Soros Foundation's recognition of his authority. His role as chair of a board specifically focused on cultural projects endorses Levin's identity as a cultural expert who has knowledge of the abstract operations of culture that can be applied to multiple project sites.

Smithsonian Folkways commissioned Levin to produce compact disks entitled *Tuva, Voices from the Center of Asia* and *Tuva*<sup>31</sup>, *Among the Spirits: Sound, Music, and Nature in Sakha and Tuva*<sup>32</sup>, and is in the process of compiling a ten disc CD/DVD set entitled *Music of Central Asia*, a project also funded by Smithsonian Folkways. Smithsonian Folkways increases its authority as a distributor of knowledge and cultural productions that accurately represent foreign cultures to a global market by employing Levin as ethnomusicologist to record and produce the above products. Levin gains authority as a cultural expert by demonstrating his knowledge of what music is considered Tuvan and which music is not by selecting and compiling musical tracks on the CDs. Levin also produced and wrote descriptions for the images that adorn the inserts that accompany the CDs. His selection of tracks for the albums and images for

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<sup>30</sup> See the [Soros Foundation website here](#).

<sup>31</sup> See [the album description on the Smithsonian Folkways Website here](#).

<sup>32</sup> See [the album description on the Smithsonian Folkways Website here](#).

the CD inserts creates the imagery and acoustics of Tuvan and Central Asia musical culture for the Smithsonian Folkways audience.

In addition to his recording projects, Levin has produced numerous concerts in conjunction with Central Asian and Siberian musicians. The largest such project was supported by the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the Silk Road Project<sup>33</sup>, and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in which four hundred plus musicians from Central Asian communities performed in Washington, D.C. on the National Mall<sup>34</sup>, and accumulated crowds numbering over one million. This concert was an effort to increase awareness in American public consciousness of the cultures that populate the contemporary regions lining the historical Silk Road. Levin, as an advisor to the project, helped curate the musicians and cultural practitioners representative-in his view- of communities historically linked by the Silk Road. The artists that performed at the festival were sanctioned as “authentic” representatives of cultures representing the historic Silk Road while Levin’s knowledge as an expert of such a vast geographical area and all its cultural diversity was endorsed by Smithsonian Folkways by appointing Levin to a curatorial role.

Levin has also contributed to a physiological study of throat singing published in the popular press magazine *Scientific American*<sup>35</sup>. In the article, the physical properties of harmonics and the physiological structures of the human vocal tract involved in overtone

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<sup>33</sup> See the [Silk Road Project website here](#).

<sup>34</sup> See [a description of the festival here](#). Note also that the video of Mark van Tongeren’s overtone singing workshop was filmed at this very festival.

<sup>35</sup> A [preview of the article can be read here](#). You must subscribe to *Scientific American*’s website in order to read the full version. See my bibliography for a full citation of the article.

singing are described. By participating in a physiological study of the human vocal tract, Levin leverages the authority of scientific knowledge to increase his perceived expertise. His research reveals physiological processes that theretofore were unknown to the world, including to throat singers. The leveraging of scientific knowledge of harmonics echoes the strategy taken by Mark van Tongeren and Tran Quang Hai described above: by uncovering physiological processes which make throat singing possible, Levin's authority to speak about throat singing has gained significant persuasive capital.

### **TUVA OR BUST! BY RALPH LEIGHTON**

In *Tuva or Bust!*<sup>36</sup> Ralph Leighton—biographer, film producer and friend of the late physicist Richard Feynman—gives his account of his joint effort with Feynman to journey to the Republic of Tuva. Their desire to travel to Tuva began one evening when Feynman and Leighton engaged in a battle of wits over world geography. During their discussion, Feynman famously asked Leighton, “So, you know all about geography, huh? What ever happened to Tannu-Tuva?”<sup>37</sup>. Over the course of the subsequent ten years, Leighton and Feynman attempted to procure visas to the Soviet Union, and were eventually successful. Sadly, Dr. Feynman succumbed to intestinal cancer just days before his Soviet visa arrived in the mail.

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<sup>36</sup> See a [free preview of the text here](#).

<sup>37</sup> See the PBS Nova production [The Last Journey of a Genius](#) for a version of this same tale in documentary format. The PBS documentary is an adaptation of the original BBC production [The Quest for Tannu-Tuva](#) broadcast in 1988.



*Tuva or Bust!* –published in May of 2000–relies heavily on pro-American/anti-Soviet Cold War sentiments to create Tuva as a timeless and forgotten land lost within “the Evil Empire”. Throughout the book the Soviet Union is positioned as a thing to be overcome, sneered at, and ridiculed; an oppressive, violent and petty force overwhelming the innocence and purity preserved in the alpine pastures of Tuva. As a result, Tuva emerges as a place marked by Rousseauian romanticism, naievity and an unspoiled connection with the past. The emphasis placed on the fact that Tuva is partitioned from the Soviet Union and off limits to non-Soviets, its forgotten quality as constructed by Feynman’s question posed above, and the sense that this very hidden and protected quality may conceal an essential and forgotten truth lost to the oppressive Soviet Union and the rest of the outside world- provides Leighton with a charisma<sup>38</sup> that he mobilizes to speak on behalf of Tuvans.

Leighton’s connection with Feynman—who has already established his own charisma by receiving a Nobel prize- lends Leighton further authority to represent Tuva. Throughout *Tuva or Bust!* Leighton emphasizes the lengths to which he and Feynman went to procure information about Tuva, thus mobilizing the rigors of scientific research that Feynman as internationally renowned physicist embodies. The late Nobel laureate—in Leighton’s chapter entitled “Clowns or Con Men”—affirms the thoroughness of

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<sup>38</sup> By charisma, I mean it in the sense described by Max Weber in his classic essay “The Sociology of Charismatic Authority”: “The provisioning of all demands that go beyond those of everyday routine has had, in principle, an entirely heterogeneous, namely, a *charismatic* foundation; the further back we look in history, the more we find this to be the case. This means that the ‘natural leaders’- in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political distress- have been neither officeholders nor incumbents of an ‘occupation’ in the present sense of the word, that is, men who have acquired expert knowledge and who serve for remuneration. The natural leaders in distress have been holders of specific gifts of the body and spirit; and these gifts have been believed to be supernatural, not accessible to everybody”(Gerth 245)

Leighton's research when Leighton questions his own authority to curate a Soviet produced museum exhibition of Central Asian archeological finds:

“‘You’re an expert, man!’ said Richard. ‘You know more about this exhibition than anybody else in the country: you know all the people involved, how to arrange for it, how much it costs; you’ve got to have more confidence’”(Leighton 165).

While Feynman does not assert that Leighton has achieved expert level knowledge of Tuva, this quote is mobilized as an intimation of Leighton's cultural expertise of the geographic area including Tuva<sup>39</sup> and the homogeneity of the peoples that populate Central Asia.

In his book Leighton describes the development of his friendship with Soviet ethnographer Sevyan Vainshtein<sup>40</sup>. Leighton describes how much footwork he went through to maintain his friendship with Vainshtein and obtain publications about Tuva and recordings of throat singing, processes continually frustrated by the glacial pace of postal exchange between the US and the Soviet Union. As with his relationship with Feynman, Leighton leverages the charisma Vainshtein has developed through his career as a Soviet ethnographer-a charisma enhanced to US readers who lived through Cold War politics- to increase Leighton's authority as a cultural expert.

Leighton also provides a detailed description of the professional relationship he developed with Anna Maenchen who was formerly married to Otto Manchen-Helfen. Manchen-Helfen visited Tannu-Tuva in 1929 and subsequently published *Reise ins Asiatische Tuwa (Journey to Tuva)*. Ralph Leighton first encountered the work in the

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<sup>39</sup> See the subsection “Static, Timeless, Homogenous” in chapter two of this thesis.

<sup>40</sup> See [Veinshtein's work \*Nomads of South Siberia: The Pastoral Economies of Tuva\* here.](#)

Library of Congress while preparing for his travel to Tuva. The work was subsequently translated into English by Ralph's brother Alan Leighton and published by Ethnographics Press<sup>41</sup>. Ralph and Alan Leighton wrote the introduction to Manchen-Helfen's work and Alan Leighton added an appendix entitled "Yurts, Yaks and Fax Machines: Report from Tuva<sup>42</sup>" in which "modern day Tuva" is described following Alan and Ralph's travel to Tuva in July of 1991. Having both "discovered" Maenchen-Helfen's book in the Library of Congress and written the introduction and appendix for the work has further endorsed Leighton's authority. Ethnographics Press' publication of the book also lends Leighton the authority of the anthropological community.

In *Tuva or Bust!* Leighton details his relationship with Ondar Darma, a Tuvan folklorist. During the years prior to Leighton's eventual trip to Tuva, Leighton and Feynman drafted several letters in the Tuvan language using a Tuvan-Russian dictionary and sent them to the Republic of Tuva's governmental offices in hopes of establishing a connection with officials in order to gain support for eventual visa applications. Over a period of 10 years correspondence between Ondar Darma and Leighton was maintained. The correspondence between a Tuvan cultural expert and Leighton imbues Leighton with the authority to represent Tuva.

Leighton is also the founder of Friends of Tuva<sup>43</sup>. The organization is described in Appendix C of *Tuva or Bust!* as "a disorganization inadvertently founded in 1981

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<sup>41</sup> Ethnographics Press is an academic press associated with the Department of Anthropology at USC Los Angeles established by Dr. Gary Seaman. The press is still in operation and occasionally publishes monographs.

<sup>42</sup> See "[Yurts, Yaks and Fax Machines: Report from Tuva](#)" [here](#).

<sup>43</sup> See the [Friends of Tuva website here](#).

whose motto is ‘Celebrating Richard Feynman’s Spirit of Adventure’” (Leighton 251). While this description may be an attempt to allay any responsibility to the quality of the knowledge available on the Friends of Tuva website and to construct Leighton as an amateur throat singing enthusiast, the organizational structure Leighton has used to build Friends of Tuva imbues him with official authority. Friends of Tuva provides electronic newsletters<sup>44</sup> that allow Leighton to display his knowledge of and official involvement with the Republic of Tuva and to serve as a purveyor of official knowledge about Tuva. The Friends of Tuva website announces CD releases of Tuvan musicians, provides links to travel logs from those who travel to Tuva, and announces the production of new research on Tuva all of which demonstrate Leighton’s involvement with and assumed authority to represent Tuva.

### **GHENGIS BLUES<sup>45</sup> BY ROKO AND ADRIAN BELIC**

*Ghengis Blues*<sup>46</sup> is a documentary film that chronicles the blues singer and songwriter Paul Pena’s participation in the 1995 International Khoomei Symposium in Kyzyl. The narrative arch of the film produces Paul Pena and his attendant crew as marginal figures in America who are awarded fame and recognition as a result of their ability to master native arts and cultural practices while visiting Tuva. The road trip

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<sup>44</sup> See an [archive of Friends of Tuva newsletters here](#).

<sup>45</sup> See [the \*Ghengis Blues\* official website here](#).

<sup>46</sup> See [the full documentary here](#).

feel<sup>47</sup> of the film further supports the message: the most disorganized of Americans are still better than the best of the Tuvans. The commercial success of the film depends on this dynamic as it inspires in the audience a glimmer of hope summarized succinctly by the adage that demands one never forget extraordinary potential is hidden in ordinary people.

While the film does contain important historical documentation of the development of post-Soviet Tuvan identity formation, the film's rural focus reinforces the narrative of Tuvan peoples as passive and repressed victims of Soviet domination and colonization. In the film, throat singers in 'traditional' dress dominate the majority of screen shots, and the Soviet era is treated as intrusive, violent modernity that encroached on the ancient and timeless Tuvan culture.

Roko and Adrian Belic, the directors of *Ghengis Blues*, initially became involved with the project when they contacted Ralph Leighton pursuing their adolescent interest in Tuva:

*"Way back when we were in high school, we saw this PBS documentary about the physicist Richard Feynman and his attempt to get to a place called Tuva. Now, in our family, we did a lot of traveling and spent a lot of time looking at maps and globes, but we'd never heard of Tuva- which meant that we absolutely had to go there one day. So, when we got out of college, we started researching Tuva but couldn't find anything. We decided to look up Ralph Leighton, the guy who did the Feynman documentary. To our amazement, he picked up the phone and chatted with us for an hour about yurts and yaks and shamans and throat singing and a land surrounded by snow-capped mountains that's rarely ever visited. Doesn't that get you excited? We thought, this is too cool!*  
*Then he told us something that would change our lives: He told us about Paul Pena, the blind, black blues musicians who, it just so happens, was going to Tuva next year for this throat singing festival that happens once every three years. We immediately saw this as our ticket to legitimacy and wanted to do a film, but it turned out that the BBC had first dibs on the project. Luckily, a few months later, the BBC pulled out; we talked to Paul Pena, and we were on course"* (Lewis).

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<sup>47</sup> By "road trip feel" I am specifically thinking of the way Sally Price eloquently illustrates the "Western principle that 'the world is ours'" in *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Price 79–81).

At the time of production, Roko and Adrian had no training in video production and no funding in support of their project, a fact continually recapitulated in the documentary. They purchased video equipment and paid their travel expenses on credit. After three and a half years of slowly editing the film in a friend's home studio, the directors toured the film to several festivals and enjoyed superlative success.

The award pedigree that *Ghengis Blues* accumulated provides the film with tremendous support and validation for the information presented in the film. In 1999, the film received the Audience Award at Sundance and in 2000 was nominated for an Academy Award.

Cameo appearances by Richard Feynman and B.B. King provide authority by association to the film. Feynman's interest in Tuva and his brief description of Tuva as a republic "in the center of Asia, in the heart of Russia, far away from anything" (Belic) characterizes Tuva as a removed isolate that peaks the interest of Noble Laureates. Feynman's expert status accords Tuva notability and exceptionalism.

The status of "documentary" provides the film with the authority of "the real" juxtaposed to the superficial frivolity of films made for entertainment. The opening sequence begins with an x-ray view into the throat of Kongar-ool Ondar— a prominent throat singer and Tuvan parliamentarian—as he sings in the style of *sygyt*. This scene follows the strategies of both Levin and van Toneren above by leveraging the mythologized penetrating gaze of science that elucidates truth hidden behind appearances. Kongar-ool is positioned as ignorant, yet entertaining object while the authors, and viewers along for the ride, are elevated as omniscient subjects. Following the

opening scene, photographic images of 1920's Tuva taken by Otto Manchen-Helfen flash across the screen in Ken Burn's style to the narrated exegesis of Tuvan history, which also contributes to the film's authoritative, informational quality.

The lack of any other popular documentary about Tuva serves to shut the door on Tuvan history and culture and establishes those who created the film as expert authorities. Because other documentaries that complicate the image of contemporary Tuvan musical cultures have not been produced, the narrative presented in *Ghengis Blues* is perceived widely as the monolithic and authoritative view into Tuvan life.

#### **KHOOMEI.COM BY STEVE SKLAR**

Khoomei.com<sup>48</sup> self-describes as “the web’s most comprehensive site for throat-singing, overtone singing, harmonic singing, chanting, online lessons, and more”. A Google search for the word khoomei produces khoomei.com as the third listed result. The proprietary owner and creator of khoomei.com, Steve Sklar<sup>49</sup>, is a fan of Tuvan throat singing as well as an amateur practitioner, performer and instructor. Sklar first traveled to Tuva in 1995 in order to take part in the International Khoomei Symposium in Kyzyl and to receive throat singing instruction from the members of Huun Huur Tu. He returned to Tuva in 2001 and has since created khoomei.com in order to bring throat singing to a global audience. The knowledge presented on Sklar’s website is grounded in

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<sup>48</sup> See [khoomei.com here](http://khoomei.com).

<sup>49</sup> See [Steve Sklar’s biography here](#).

his own experiences and in the writings of Mark van Tongeren<sup>50</sup>, Dr. Theodore Levin and others<sup>51</sup>.

A wide array of representations of throat singers, life in Tuva, and information about Tuvan throat singing and other overtone singing techniques are available on [khoomei.com](http://khoomei.com). Sklar's collections of personal photos he took while visiting Tuva<sup>52</sup>, videos he recorded at the International Throat Singing Symposium<sup>53</sup>, and his involvement with scientific studies of throat singing techniques<sup>54</sup> demonstrate Sklar's participation in the creation and dissemination of knowledge about Tuvan throat singing. The public demonstration of knowledge and personal experience Sklar presents serves to establish him as a "throat singing expert".

Sklar has used the authority rendered from his public demonstration of knowledge to establish himself as a teacher of Tuvan throat singing. On his website, Sklar offers several prerecorded and downloadable throat singing lessons<sup>55</sup> which feature him as the

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<sup>50</sup> See [Steve's mention and endorsement of van Tongeren's book here](#) and [here](#). <sup>51</sup> See [Steve's links and resources page here](#).

<sup>52</sup> See [Steve's photo galleries here](#).

<sup>53</sup> See [Steve's video gallery here](#).

<sup>54</sup> See [spectrograph's of both Steve and Kaigal-ool Xoalyg throat singing techniques here](#). Steve also provides an endoscopic view of his throat singing in action. See videos of Steve's larynx while singing both the styles [sygyt](#) and [kargyraa](#) recorded at the University of Wisconsin in 2006.

<sup>55</sup> See [Steve Sklar's online throat singing lessons here](#). Many who produce throat singing music in Tuva today voiced their concern over the income Steve makes utilizing the authority given to him by his association with *Huun Huur Tu* and, because he is the proprietary owner of the domain [www.khoomei.com](http://www.khoomei.com), Steve has nominal control over a key domain name related to a Tuvan national art. Theodore Levin faced similar criticism in Tuva following the release of the Smithsonian Folkways albums Levin produced. See Levin's account in *Where*



instructor. These lessons are designed to facilitate students' acquisition of three styles of Tuvan throat singing<sup>56</sup>: xorekteer, kargyraa, and sygyt. Steve asserts on his website: “ in order to teach effectively, I’ve deconstructed the traditional styles so that they may be taught with simple, fun and safe techniques and exercises.<sup>57</sup>” Steve’s claim to superior knowledge and instructional authority depends on the absence of ‘traditional’ pedagogies, or at the very least, the ineffectiveness and danger of such ‘traditional’ modes of knowledge transmission.

*Rivers and Mountains Sing* pg. 43. For more on the appropriation and commodification of Tuvan throat singing, see chapter two of this thesis.

<sup>56</sup> Throat singers from many different regions surrounding Tuva (i.e. Mongolia, Altai Republic, Khakassia, etc.) make claim to original ownership of throat singing. The debate over origins has been aided by “scientific” description and classification of throat singing styles. Dr. Zoya Kyrgyz- director of the Scientific Khoomei Center in Kyzyl- created the classificatory term *xorekteer* as a descriptor referencing a core throat singing technique in her work, *Тывинское Горлевоое Пение*, as a means to distinguish Tuvan throat singing from other regional traditions (for further discussion of Dr. Zoya Kyrgyz’s writings and the debate over the origins of throat singing, see chapter three of this thesis). Here, Steve Sklar uses the descriptor *xorekteer* to align his teachings with Zoya Kyrgyz’s terminology as well as the scientific study that underlies the creation of such a category. [See Steve’s descriptions of the various Tuvan throat singing styles here.](#)

The debate of the origin of throat singing-and the somewhat dubious and spurious attempts at classification which surround them-are passed off as “pointless” by Theodore Levin (see pg. 71-72 *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*) because, according to Levin, throat singing represents an art form shared by all of the currently combative claimants to the “geo-cultural origin” of throat singing, which should serve to unify these practitioners. Far from pointless, it is my view that claims to origin mean claims to authenticity, which means full concert halls. <sup>57</sup> Steve references here a commonly held belief that Tuvan throat singing has no technical and prescribed methodology vis-a-vis singing “traditions” of the “West”. For further discussion of this debate, see the subsection entitled “More Intuitive, Less Rational” in section two of this chapter.

Several of his students, including classically trained baritone and overtone singing enthusiast Wolfgang Saus<sup>58</sup>, recommend and support Sklar as a throat singing expert and professional instructor. Saus' authority as a classically trained opera singer accords the authority of Enlightenment era classicism to construct Steve's identity as an 'expert'. Saus gains authority as a professional vocalist for endorsing Sklar by demonstrating Saus' ability to recognize Sklar's professionalism.

Steve also leverages the authority of academics to establish himself as an expert. On Sklar's website, Dr. Tran Quang Hai grants Sklar authority by offering his professional assessment of Sklar's expertise as a throat singer and instructor:

“His [Steve's] explanations of different Tuvan styles are correct. He is now the master of Tuvan throat voice techniques in the West. -Prof. Tran Quang Hai.”

By conferring authority to Sklar, Hai presents himself as an 'expert' who possesses the ability to judge Sklar's level of knowledge relative to an 'authentic' ideal and increases his involvement and visibility in the discourse of Tuvan throat singing. Sklar gains legitimacy by invoking the institutional authority of ethnomusicology.

Sklar has also been instrumental in the popularization of Huun Huur Tu. Steve was the tour manager and “*khoomi* instructor” during the 2002 Huun Huur Tu tour of the United States. Sklar's website continues to update tour date information for the group's US tours. Sklar describes his relationship with the members of Huun Huur Tu as one of friendship and mentorship. His authority as a cultural expert is validated by way of his connection with 'authentic' Tuvan throat singers. Huun Huur Tu is produced as an authentic source of throat singing tradition as a result of Steve's claim to expertise.

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<sup>58</sup> See [Wolfgang Saus' page on the Overtone Music Network website here.](#)

## Chapter Two: Speaking of Tuva

The discourse above has produced experts, expert knowledge and a neo-traditionalist narrative that describes contemporary Tuvan life. The discourse is typified by commonly deployed tropes that characterize Tuvans as noble, naive nomads, and the experts who ‘discover’ them as intrepid, visionary disenchantees longing for the simple life. Commonly, these tropes emphasize the tension between freedom and structure, which functions as a romantic principle in the discourse. This chapter analyzes and deconstructs the tropes of neo-traditionalist discourse about Tuva and Tuvan throat singing<sup>59</sup>.

### ISOLATED BEHIND IMPENETRABLE BARRIERS

Tuva is often described as a place concealed behind barriers. These barriers are physical in the case of Tuva’s Mountain ranges-the Sayan, Altai and Tannu-Ola-, political in reference to Cold War travel restrictions, and linguistic regarding the arduous slopes of acquisition of both the Russian and Tuvan languages for English speakers. The use of this particular trope serves to establish those authors, travelers, scientists, etc. who travel to Tuva as intrepid explorers who effuse the charisma of exceptionalism and to produce Tuva as a tramontane isolate, cut off from the ‘modern’ world, wherein Tuvans are preserved as ignorant, naïve and impotent children of a lost era. For example, in *Overtone Singing*, Mark van Tongeren opens his work with a prelude entitled “Meeting with a Tuvan Shepherd”, in which he places distinct emphasis on the difficulties of travel to and communication in Tuva:

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“In 1993 I spent my first summer in Tuva, the republic at the southern border of central Siberia. Days after my arrival I had an opportunity to drive straight to the border of Mongolia with a group of Americans, who might go down in history as the first and last bicycle tourists to cross the (now-closed) Russian-Mongolian border with their bikes” (Tongeren XXIII).

This quote does not mention the fact that Tuvans/Mongols/Russians cross this border every day. The reader hereby imagines the American cyclists and van Tongeren as intrepid, daring and imbued with an authority that allows them to discover, to be the first. The Mongols, Tuvans and Russians who have also crossed the border are not given any superlative consideration, denying them mobility. This quote also fails to set the history of this border in any kind of meaningful context: why has the border been closed? what does it mean that the border is now closed? to whom has it been closed? etc. This quote uses the orientalist mystique of Mongolia and lingering American Cold War fears toward Russia to make the reader presume that crossing the border is a dangerous endeavor (i.e. the border is now closed because of tensions) and therefore these cyclists are brave and daring in the face of Russian/Mongol/Tuvan threat.

In the same prelude, van Tongeren assumes vast cultural and linguistic differences between rural Tuvans and himself that serve as a prophylactic between Tuvan culture and the outside world:

“The interpreter exchanges some questions and answers with the shepherd, and tells him who I am. Although I speak Russian, Mergen does not, and I speak only a few Tuvan words, so I wait patiently for the initial courtesy to finish...I can see he is a bit uncomfortable with the unexpected guests. Tuvans that live in the countryside are shy with foreigners, who were rarely allowed to enter Tuva until two years before this summer”(Tongeren XXV).

In this portion of the prelude, van Tongeren has approached a herdsman somewhere in rural Tuva in order to talk to him about throat singing. The use of an interpreter creates a

gap between the herdsman and van Tongeren that can only be bridged by way of a “modern” Tuvan: that is, someone who still retains vestiges of the past symbolized by the Tuvan language but-having learned Russian- is working his way toward modernity. The initial courtesies van Tongeren patiently waits through are signifiers of tradition that van Tongeren is aware of but the need for which he has completely surmounted, thus constructing van Tongeren as modern and enlightened, the herdsman as naïve, childlike and product of a bygone age. The discomfort the herdsman seems to be feeling is linked to the presence of foreigners. The reader thus imagines the herdsman as insulated and protected from the outside world and van Tongeren as an objectively distanced and thereby dominant globetrotter, completely comfortable with the anxieties produced by an encounter with other.

Van Tongeren’s foreignness also provides a false sense of homogeneity of peoples who would have been allowed to travel to Tuva during the days of Soviet travel restrictions; that is to say, all members of ethnic groups that surround and move through Tuva which are not Tuvan are hereby constructed as culturally similar enough to not cause anxiety in the cloistered herdsman. Therefore cultural distinctions between ethnic groups in Russia are flattened creating a culturally homogenous mass set in opposition to the foreign “West”. His simplified construction of “East” and “West” disallows cultural exchange and interpenetration, which imbues van Tongeren with the exceptionalism accompanying his perceived intrepidity.

In *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*, Levin mobilizes Soviet era travel restrictions to portray Tuva as an area cut off from the outside world, to reinforce the

existence of culturally “Eastern” and “Western” civilizations, and to construct knowledge of throat singing as esoteric:

“In the mid-1980s throat singing was all but unknown in the West, and Tuva, an autonomous republic within the Soviet Union, was a destination diplomatically off-limits to Americans. I knew little about throat-singing other than that it was a musical and physiological wonder and that I wanted to meet people who were able to do it. What I did not expect to discover in Tuva was that throat-singing was only the most visible- or rather, audible- point of entry into a vast realm where music, music-making, and music cognition were attuned to a nomadic understanding of sound and its place in the world”(Levin xi).

“My first visit to Tuva in 1987 marked the first time that a researcher from the West had been given permission to study Tuvan music in situ. Since then, my affection and respect for the place, its people, and its music has continued to grow, and with each visit, I have ventured more deeply into the music and the social and natural environment that has nourished it. At the same time, the remarkable worldwide circulation of Tuvan music over the past fifteen years has become a story in itself. Almost from the beginning of my visits, Tuvan music has been traveling far beyond the borders of the Altai”(Levin XII).

In the above quotations, Levin asserts that throat singing is part of what he calls “the nomadic sound world of Inner Asia”. His idea is that the nomadic way of life allowed for musicians to create a specific method of producing sound to interface with their natural environment in a spontaneous, improvised, and creative way unknown to-or possibly forgotten by -sedentary civilizations. The thesis of his work asserts “a proto-Turkic musical language once existed as a comprehensive whole among the Inner Asian nomads in the halcyon days of the Khaganate”(Levin 72). Levin’s intrepidity, expertise, the esoteric quality of his knowledge and his ability to discover this “sound world” depends on the reader to assume much about the Tuvan population.

First, the reader must assume that Tuvans are completely isolated from the rest of the world for Levin to discover his proposed sound world. Secondly, Tuvans must be ignorant of the global trade in music if they had not already capitalized on their particular

musical tradition. Third, their isolation also implies that Tuvans lack agency and impulse to travel and perform their music abroad. Such a claim necessarily constructs Tuvans as impotent and naïve. Lastly, Levin's assertion depends on the inability of Tuvans to recognize the significance of their musical practices vis-à-vis music of other cultures. That is to say, Tuvans must not recognize the uniqueness of their own music in relation to music of other cultures if Levin as outsider discovered the nomadic sound world beneath the noses of Tuvan singers.

### **STATIC, TIMELESS, HOMOGENOUS**

In *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian shows how anthropology's rejection of Enlightenment era cultural chauvinism lead to the "'bracketing out' of time as a dimension of intercultural study" (Fabian 39–41). In the case of post-Soviet Tuva, Soviet conceptualizations of Tuvan society in relation to Marxist material-historical approaches to ethnography and history have been roundly rejected. Producers of contemporary Tuvan discourse take an antagonistic stance toward what Francine Hirsch calls "state sponsored evolutionism<sup>60</sup>" and declare that Marxist historicism and its attendant progressivist conception of time is tantamount to a propagandistic bias. Beneath the rubble of the Soviet era's collapsed, disempowered and popularly denigrated ideologies, contemporary contributors to Tuvan discourse are left with cultural material no longer held in relation to a conception of time. Similar to post-Enlightenment discourses that applied eternalized metaphors of nature to secular sources of authority in lieu of the

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<sup>60</sup> For a thorough analysis of the Soviet deployment of state sponsored evolutionism, see [Francine Hirsch's work \*Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union\*](#).

Christian God (Bendix 27), the Tuvan discourse above produces “authentic” Tuva as a timeless, static and homogenous culture that was suppressed beneath man made constructs, namely Soviet ideology.

‘Authentic’ Tuvan cultural practices have been effectively constructed as static and timeless in the discourse. Dr. Valentina Suzukei, in *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*, informs Dr. Levin of the pre-Soviet nomadic conception of time:

“Imagine being out on the steppe-nomads didn’t have limitations on time. There were no boundaries. Performances could be extremely varied in length, from very short to very long, depending on the atmosphere and the mood of the performer. The topshuur, igil, shoor-people would play these instruments for a long time sitting around the campfire. Before the hunt, when they’d go out at dawn, they’d sing and play the whole night. The eternity of being was part of the herders’ sense of time”(Levin 54).

Dr. Suzukei portrays a highly romantic image of Tuvan nomadic life in which both music and economic pursuits lacked structure. In her conception nomads seem to have no responsibilities, which would mean that the animals they maintained were entirely self regulating, that adjacent clans never attempted to rustle livestock from one another, and that all of Siberian nomadic life’s requirements were secondary in importance to music production. Tuvan music itself is conceived of as lacking structure, which suggests that Tuvan music was never the product of concerted, sustained effort and development. While Dr. Suzukei’s conception of Tuva’s nomadic past does not contain the slightest hint of condescension, I argue that her appreciation of an idealized past produces an unintended externality: Tuvans of the past, in their eternal lack of responsibility, are infantilized relative to the demands and rigors of working life in contemporary global capitalism.



In Overtone Singing, Mark van Tongeren places distinct emphasis on the static and timeless quality of throat singing:

“We listen attentively for a while to the throat singer, whom we’ll call by the most popular of Tuvan names: Mergen...He hasn’t got much work to do and besides some electricity poles we look at a scene which is much as it was a hundred, or perhaps more than a thousand years ago. Just like his forefathers this herdsman is passing his time with singing. Singing to his sheep and his horse, to the steppes and the hills and to a small brook. Maybe he even sings to the electricity wire and poles that range over his country. At close distance one can sometimes hear their buzzing sounds, which faintly resemble the pure oscillations of the otherworldly sound of the shepherd...There is a timeless, eternal quality in the sounds. They could be echoes of bygone ages, but equally well provide the sonic background in a documentary on the latest accomplishments in space travel”(Tongeren XXV).

This attempt to complicate a romantic conception of Tuvan nomadic life by way of the presence of electric wires possibly shows van Tongeren’s awareness of anti-Rousseauian critiques; however, I argue that the attempt fails and illustrates his romanticizing tendencies. The timelessness suggested by the static continuity of the singing “tradition” and the unchanging quality of the nomadic scene produces Mergen as a victim of cultural determinism. Mergen lacks the agency and impulse to change his lifestyle and to invent new methods of musical expression. Mergen’s singing seems to play a functional role in maintaining the harmony of his natural environment as he serenades the livestock, steppe and brooks. He even sings to the electric wires suggesting that Mergen does not understand their function, and did not take part in constructing these implements that intrude into the timeless past from a progressive modernity. The construction of van Tongeren as intrepid expert from a progressive culture depends on the ignorance, impotence, and infantilization of Mergen.

## ANCIENTNESS SIGNIFIES QUALITY

Timeless Tuva described above has been recontextualized in relation to a conception of time shared by contemporary producers of knowledge about Tuva. While contradictory, timeless ‘authentic’ Tuva is a place to which one must return. Timeless, yet not immediately present, traveling to Tuva is as much a movement across the globe as it is a journey into the past; a past conceptualized by a freedom from the confining, inexorable forward march of progressive time. The ‘ancientness’ of Tuvan throat singing is mobilized in discourse as a signifier of its positive quality and truth content.

Sean Quirk—manager of the *Alash* ensemble—commented on the ancient quality of throat singing during Alash’s performance at the 2010 University of Texas Throat Singing Symposium<sup>61</sup>:

“For those of you who are here for the first time for the music of Tuva, a very, very big welcome to you. You are in for a life changing experience, as those of your neighbors around you who have already seen us can already attest. We are bringing you music this evening that is very old. It’s very ancient. It comes from a place very far away from here, as has been discussed, all the way in the center of the continent of Asia and this tradition is one that some musicologists claim stretches back to a time before language.”

Quirk’s claim that the music of *Alash* is ancient is supposed to signify the inherent quality of the music. Locating the source of throat singing in pre-linguistic man suggests to the audience that this music operates at a precognitive level. The music of *Alash* is not necessarily Tuvan; it is music of pre-identity, pre-ego. It is the music of humanity’s *id* (Torgovnick). This music is emotionally affective even though the words are incomprehensible to the non-Tuvan speaking audience because it expresses something

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<sup>61</sup> See [Sean Quirk’s commentary on the ancient origins of throat singing at The University of Texas Throat Singing Symposium in April of 2009.](#)

that all humans feel and understand. The longevity of Tuvan music thus signifies its eternal longevity, and its almost moralizing authority. Quirk's claim also neatly sidesteps cultural critique by deterritorializing throat singing, rendering the practice available to the public imaginary.

In *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*, Dr. Valentina Suzukei mobilizes the "ancientness" of Tuvan throat singing as proof of the logic and integrity of "authentic" Tuvan practices:

"To survive this long it has to be really solid, and backed by a musical logic, by a specific form of musical thinking. And where it doesn't survive as a living practice, it survives in cultural memory. For example, when Turkic peoples hear overtone singing, it arouses something in them. The aura of this kind of music nourishes them. I witnessed this in the days of the Soviet Union when there used to be big festivals, and Uzbeks, Turkmen, Azeris and others would come and listen to our Tuvan musicians" (Levin 51).

By stating that Tuvan throat singing arouses a sense of collective unity amongst Turkic ethnic groups now fragmented by nation-state identities, Dr. Suzukei presupposes the existence of an ancient cultural commonality shared by all contemporary Turkic peoples that is evoked by throat singing music. She argues that throat singing—and by extension, Turkic identity—is biologically inherited, and that Tuvan practices in particular are solely expressive and evocative of that ancient and homogenous Turkic identity. The continuity of the 'ancient' tradition assumed in Dr. Suzukei's argument depends upon the creative impotence of Tuvan musicians. For a tradition to extend into a distant past, musicians must never deviate from musical prescriptions nor creatively expand upon received musical forms.

### **MORE INTUITIVE, LESS RATIONAL, MORE REAL**

The transmission of Tuvan throat singing is portrayed in discourse as a process of intuitive inheritance lacking an active pedagogy. Throat singers often emphasize the fact that they cannot remember how they learned to throat sing, or that no one taught them to do it: they simply inherited the practice. The passive, intuitive inheritance of throat singing is set in direct opposition to active acquisition of other vocal techniques such as Bel-Canto opera, whose pedagogies prescribe a rationalized, methodical approach. The opposition of intuitive and rational approaches reinforces the claim to naturalness and determinism that characterizes the descriptions of throat singing- and by extension *Tuvanness* -produced by the discourse.

During the 2010 University of Texas Throat Singing Symposium, Sean Quirk explained to Austin News 8 reporters<sup>62</sup> how the members of *Alash* learned to throat sing:

“They have such a precise ability to control the muscles in their throat and the way that they produce sound... And all of the members of Alash, of course, have been doing it since they were little so they can’t remember really the process that they went through to learn it”.

I was also asked to comment on the learning process of throat singing in the same interview:

“It’s one of those things where you have to understand the technique and if you listen enough you can just reproduce it”.

Quirk’s assertion that the *Alash* musicians cannot remember how they learned to throat sing constructs the acquisition of throat singing as an event, not a process. While the musicians began throat singing at a young age, their entire musical training -learning a repertoire, perfecting their techniques and gaining experience as performers- is concealed

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<sup>62</sup> See [the Austin News 8 Interview here](#).

by the mythological conception of throat singing as a passive inheritance. Such a conception produces a strong sense of charisma and exceptionalism at the cost of depriving the musicians of the labor and effort exerted to develop their craft. My comment on the process of learning throat singing echoes, if not directly implies a similar narrative. My simplification of the learning process produces a charisma at the cost of the denigration of the throat singing tradition.

Contributors to the discourse also claim that listening to throat singing produces an effect on the listener that effectively modulates one's perceptions of reality. According to some, listening to the sound of throat singing removes obfuscating, culturally inculcated modes of thought, thereby engendering a direct experience of "the real", which is usually conceived of as a static, eternalized state of nature. For example, Dr. Valentina Suzukei in *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing* asserts that "habitual listening" filters a constituent component of the throat singing style *khoomoi*:

"The middle of the xoomoi sound is thick-vibrations are everywhere, but this is the part that habitual listening filters out. If you can focus in on this middle part, you begin to feel the extent to which the sound space is filled up. And you hear things the way they really are, rather than through our customary filters" (Levin 55).

Suzukei postulates that listening to Tuvan throat singing will allow one to experience a more robust reality otherwise cloaked by habituated patterns of listening. The juxtaposition between "the real" and "the habituated" positions Tuvan throat singing as more real, and therefore, evocative of a natural determinism vis-à-vis the ever-changing habituations governed by whimsical, culturally inculcated tastes. The natural, eternalized character of throat singing necessarily depends on throat singers' inability to innovate and change. Dr. Suzukei's ability to make such an observation assumes expert knowledge of

the pedagogies of a vast array of singing styles and the subjective experiences of multitudes of listeners worldwide.

Mark van Tongeren echoes Dr. Suzuki's above claim in *Overtone Singing* in his chapter entitled "The Great Realm":

"I experience specific qualities, such as 'glass', 'solid', 'crystal'...with much less awareness of color. These qualities are more like eternal realities than inner associations. It is as if I can access the symbol or idea of say 'crystal' stored in my brain and experience all that it signifies without any filtering process...this can give me a profound sensation of an eternal and universal dimension beyond my own-or anyone else's-physical reality"(Tongeren 247).

Van Tongeren's claim that throat singing allows him to encounter a realm of eternal philosophical truths is not identical to Suzuki's claim that listening to throat singing improves aural awareness. However, both are built on the same premise: throat singing is part of a natural order that has been obscured by culturally inculcated models of thought and perception.

### **CLOSE TO NATURE, MODERNITY AS INTRUSION**

Dr. Regina Bendix claims in her book *In Search of Authenticity*, "Folklore has long served as the vehicle in the search for the authentic, satisfying a longing for an escape from modernity. The ideal folk community, envisioned as pure and free from civilization's evils, was a metaphor for everything that was not modern" (Bendix 7). When the concept of modernity is deployed by contributors to the hegemonic Tuvan discourse, modernity is defined by a relationship between humans and advanced electronic technology, connection to and awareness of the world beyond the borders of Tuva, a desire for consumer products, a willful pursuit of the acquisition of social rank and prestige, alienation from nature and a loss of the skills required to exist in a rural

environment, and thus a ‘loss of culture’. The concept of modernity is utilized in framing the discourse that defines Tuva: “authentic” Tuva is a lack of modernity, and therefore, the presence of modernity in Tuva is constructed as an imposition upon and threat to ‘authentic’ *Tuvanness*.

‘Authentic’ and timeless Tuva is often set in diametric opposition to Tuva’s urban center, Kyzyl. The source of Tuvan ethnic identity is located by contemporary discourse in the rural and remote regions of Tuva. The ‘closeness’ of Tuvan music to the natural setting of Tuva’s abundant rural environments serves to conflate Tuvan music and identity with a perceived balance and harmony found in a mythological conception of nature. As a consequence, modernity is constructed as a damaging intrusion into *Tuvanness* and the natural order of the rural landscape.

In *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*, Sasha Bapa discusses with Dr. Levin the environmental damage incurred by many areas of Siberia during Soviet industrialization. Dr. Levin then causally links the damage of the environment to a loss of culture. In the second quote below, Dr. Levin suggests that throat singing music can awaken a common humanity in its listeners as well as offer a possible solution to global environmental crises:

“Huun Huur Tu’s Sasha Bapa was optimistic about the ability of Tuvan culture to regenerate itself. ‘Tuva is a small place,’ he said. ‘And fortunately, its resources are too limited to have attracted the worst of what the Soviet Union had to offer the ‘small peoples’ of Siberia: destruction of their natural habitat through industrialization, deforestation, and urbanization.’ Fortunately as well, Tuva’s population of ethnic Tuvans- around 200,000 in the mid-1990s- had been large enough to avoid another of the ignominious fates of Siberian peoples: annihilation of their culture through language loss and assimilation. Tuvan, which belongs to the Oghuz group of Eastern Turkic languages, was still very much alive in the countryside, and this fact bode well for our studies. The relationship between singing, language, poetics and the sounds, topographies, and beings of the natural world would form a primary focus of our work. The animistic spirituality that nourished this relationship was also very much alive, even if it was not

immediately apparent in the urban landscape of Kyzyl, where many of Tuva's best musicians resettled in order to pursue their careers"(Levin 25).

"Wherever I traveled, I met musicians who have contributed generously to the resilience of the nomadic spirit amid grave social, economic, and environmental challenges. Moreover, the nomadic imagination's ingenious transformation of landscape and soundscape into music can surely inspire not only pastoralists. For the rest of us, such music may provide a moment of clarity that connects us to our collective past- and if we listen carefully enough, to a future more in harmony with the environment that sustains our planet's fragile experiment with human life" (Levin XV).

The simultaneous critique of the environmental and cultural policies of the Soviet Union is set in opposition to the relatively untouched Tuvan rural environment and the thriving presence of Tuvan language and musical practices mediated by animist spirituality. It is here assumed that *Tuvanness* is incompatible with modernity and therefore any presence of modernization processes in Tuva or a display of modern cultural and social modes of behavior by ethnic Tuvans are seen as a violent intrusion by a force of vacuous cultural loss. The construction of Tuvan identity as timeless, unchanging, non-violent, and close to nature depends upon Tuvans' non-involvement in modernization processes. The trauma and violence that occurred as a result of the post-Soviet economic collapse and which now perpetuate in the forms of domestic violence, unemployment, and alcoholism are constructed as a symptom of modernity, and therefore, the responsibility of an ethnically Russian colonial force. *Tuvanness* is also hereby constructed as biologically determined and incapable of change without complete loss. As a result, Tuvan musicians become prisoners of tradition; any attempt at innovation and change is seen as a movement away from- if not a direct attack on- *Tuvanness*.



### **Chapter Three: Conclusion**

Citizens of the former Soviet Union faced economic, social and psychological crises following the 1991 collapse, which have been answered by the emergence of highly inventive narratives of identity. Some of these emergent narratives promote a return to rural life, prescribing cultural practices colored by a nostalgic longing for an authentic past. Following Hobsbawm and Ranger, Regina Bendix and Svetlana Boym, this thesis attempts to critically examine the narrative commonly told about throat singing ensembles from the Republic of Tuva, which have fashioned themselves as sources of ‘authentic’ Tuvan identity.

Tuvan throat singing, a technique that allows a single singer to produce multiple notes simultaneously, and related Tuvan cultural productions have enjoyed enormous international success since 1991. Tuvan throat singing ensembles tour the world, performing in major concert halls, universities, museums, shopping malls, and occasionally, alternate lifestyle communes. Performers are clad in silk robes, play wooden instruments decorated with animal hides, and tell mystified audiences of their tramontane homeland located in the geographic center of Asia.

In response to growing international interest in Tuvan music, a scholarly discourse quickly grew up around these ensembles and delivered catch phrases and technical terminology to throat singing fans and aficionados. These professional, academic works –a handful of ethnographies- curate a representation of contemporary Tuva as either a romantic enclave concealing a lost world that time forgot or as paradise lost to intrusive Soviet colonialism. The works that focus specifically on contemporary

Tuvan music construct throat singing as a source of resurgent, 'authentic' Tuvan identity emerging from beneath the rubble of the culturally repressive, Soviet past.

Fan and aficionado productions- websites and other web content, a documentary film, CDs, performances, and workshops- redistribute the findings presented by the ethnographies. The redistributed image of Tuva frequently emerges within the context of pan-nativist discourse, in which indigenous communities represent a homogenous, unified, and utopian worldview set in opposition to a demonized modernity. Where tradition was once seen as iron cage, in the discourse it is refigured as a tool of liberation from the impersonal and mentally dangerous character of contemporary life. In this way, Tuvan neo-traditionalist identity has played a strong role in accumulating Tuva's international fame and evoked demand for the development of tourist opportunities in Tuva.

It is my view that claims to cultural continuity of throat singing as static, timeless tradition serve as a strategy of legitimization for newly formed cultural practices. These newly formed 'traditions' support the establishment of cultural experts and expert knowledge, and promote a model for individual and societal development that addresses the social, economic and psychological challenges faced by Tuvans in the post-Soviet historical context. In the short term, this neo-traditionalist project has seen notable success toward these ends.

The popular discourse surrounding the neo-traditionalist productions provides continued economic growth in Tuva. Increases in the numbers of tourists who arrive in response to the discourse searching for throat singing instructors, shamanic ceremonies

and horseback treks through mountainous wilderness have lead to the development of eco-tourist ventures, schools of shamanic studies, throat singing camps, and an ethno-tourist center. A festival of ‘traditional’ music and belief is held in Tuva annually and draws international performers and audiences. Second and third generations of Tuvan throat singing ensembles are currently training for careers as touring musicians.

Socially, the success throat singing ensembles have abroad provides a significant source of pride for Tuvans who otherwise face a sense of isolation from and anonymity in the globalizing world. Although throat singing was a relatively little known practice in Tuva until the first throat singing ensembles received international acclaim, non-musicians in Tuva often responded to my questions about throat singing with a sense of pride. A member of the Tuvan National Judo Team expressed his appreciation for throat singing musicians, “You know, I had never heard throat singing until I was a teenager. I still don’t know much about it, but I think it is great what those musicians do for us. They are making a name for Tuva”.

The development of a Tuvan identity based on the assumption of an ‘authentic’ and static cultural source provides significant psychological stability for citizens still afflicted by rampant unemployment and other attendant social ills following the Soviet collapse. If tradition is perceived as static and unchanging, a nostalgic glance back into time has the effect of providing a sense of inevitable continuity and stability into the future. As the bright light of the Soviet future faded, the return to ‘tradition’ alleviates the anxieties felt in response to a now uncertain Russian future.

Though successful in the ways discussed above, the “neo-traditionalist” narrative

negatively impacts the lived experience of many Tuvans. Establishing an identity on the assumption of a fixed tradition located in rural Tuva that was repressed and irreversibly altered by colonialism creates a sense of loss, nostalgia, and alienation in many Tuvans. For example, I spoke with Azii Ondar, the wife of a vocalist in the Tuvan National Orchestra about Tuvan life and culture. She informed me that if I wanted to see *real* Tuva, I should visit Tozhu, a province located in northwestern Tuva. This particular region is heavily forested, lacks developed infrastructure and is home to a reindeer herding economy. I then asked her if she had ever been there herself, to which she laughingly replied, “No. I grew up in the city and although I speak Tuvan, I’m not a *real* Tuvan like those who live in the far regions”.

‘Neo-traditionalist’ claims that authentic Tuvans live isolated lives, close to the land creates a simultaneous fascination with and distrust of increased development and urbanization. Many Tuvans expressed their anxious concern over the impending end to Tuvan isolation and ‘purity’ signified by the development of a sub-branch of the trans-Siberian railroad that is slated for completion by the end of 2014. Igor Kushkendey of the ensemble *Chirgilchin* told me:

“Now we are isolated. No one comes here or bothers us. But what will happen when Chinese come, waves of tourists arrive, or skyscrapers are built in Kyzyl? You feel how free Tuva is now, but I think it won’t be this way too much longer. Ah well, nothing last forever”.

Constructing Tuvans as passive victims of Soviet domination contributes to ethnic tensions between Slavic Russians and Tuvans. One member of the National Orchestra who has just started an eco-tourist venture in western Tuva told me of the culturally devastating effects Russian colonialism has had on Tuvan morality.

“Before Russians came, did you know there was no cussing in the Tuvan language? Now you hear Tuvans on the streets saying the most despicable things. Much of that behavior is due to alcoholism, of course, but the Russians brought alcohol with them here as well! Tuvans used to only drink after the age of 40, and then only a thimble full at a sitting, for health primarily”.

Though Tuvan musicians enjoyed initial success abroad due- in part- to the sensationally romantic character of their narrative, many Tuvan throat singers perceive the early success of their careers is on the wane due to the constrictive limits of their traditionalist image. Nachyn Choodu, of the ensemble *Alash*, voiced his concerns to me after a concert in West Virginia in the summer of 2011:

“So often we hear people call us ‘The Throat Singers’, as if all throat singing groups are the same. This is a problem for us because music is our profession and there are several Tuvan groups who tour America, not to mention Mongolian musicians who also throat sing. If we are all perceived as the same and that our music is not innovative and developing, people will not return and see our concerts”.

Aldar Tamdyn, a musician of the throat-singing ensemble *Chirgilchin*, discussed with me his frustration at highly romanticized and mystical notions of the use of throat singing.

“Throat singing is not just applicable to Tuvan instrumental music”, he says. “It is a whole world of sound, and a *beautiful* sound. We are very lucky that this music made its way through communism to us. Now we *have* to use it. It should be used in jazz, blues, rock, opera. Why not? We have to do this otherwise it is no longer a tradition. Sure people can use throat singing to chant, meditate, shamanize and all that, but to only look at throat singing as a mystical tool limits the possibilities of this incredible practice.”

While the typical socially debilitating externalities of primitivizing discourses are obviously present as a corollary to post-Soviet neo-traditionalist projects in Tuva, a writ-large rejection of these productions based on typical critical approaches undermines the short-term positive benefits the project generates and somewhat misses the point. The ingenious creativity and high level of professionalism demonstrated by Tuvan cultural

producers-though may be doomed to short run success- has generated considerable international attention, which will potentially benefit Tuvans in the long run. While I am sympathetic to the negative effects primitivizing discourse has on Tuvans-as evidenced above- the relative isolation and anonymity Tuvans face combined with the tragic social, environmental, psychological and economic conditions inherited following the Soviet collapse, I also laude the creativity and success Tuvan musicians have demonstrated and enjoyed. Rather than browbeat the primitivizers, I echo the historian Toomas Alatalu as he asserts in his article *Tuva: A State Reawakens*: it is time more attention was paid to the Republic of Tuva.

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